

**PRESENCE IN DISTANCE:
THE LIVED EXPERIENCE OF ADULT FAITH FORMATION
IN AN ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY**

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Marianne Evans Mount
(ABSTRACT)

The purpose of this hermeneutic phenomenological study was to better understand the ways that adult learners studying Catholic theology become present to one another, strengthen bonds of community, and contemplate the face of Christ in computer-mediated, text-based distance education. Ten geographically dispersed learners seeking undergraduate or graduate degrees in Catholic theology participated in the study. There was no face-to-face interaction.

Through a password protected site specifically designed for the research, participants engaged in eight weeks of text-based, online conversation. They reflected on emergent themes about technology and the ways that it alters time, place, presentation of self, and relationships. Text as sacred, relational, presentational, communal, and transformational was explored, as was the nature and meaning of community, especially the spiritual quest to contemplate the face of Christ in an online community. The study offers a deep understanding of the meaning of presence and the development of community in the context of faith.

Serving as the philosophical methodological foundation were the writings of Martin Heidegger (1927/1993), Hans-Georg Gadamer (1960/1999), Gabriel Marcel (1937/1967), John Paul II as Cardinal Carol Wojtyla (1976), and Robert Sokolowski (1993). The phenomenological method of Max van Manen (2003) guided data collection and analysis through the dynamic interplay of six research activities: (a) turning to the phenomenon which seriously interests us and commits us to the world; (b) investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it; (c) reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon; (d) describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting; (e) maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon; (f) balancing the research context by considering parts and whole.

Recommendations for practitioners of computer-mediated education are explored; suggestions for future research include longitudinal studies of theology students in fully online programs, ways of introducing transcendent presence in online learning communities, how language bears on learning and presence, and the role of non-text based media and virtual environments on presence and the spiritual quest.

We are writing this so our joy may be complete.
(New Testament and the Psalms, 2006, 1 John: 4)

Understand this well: there is something holy, something divine hidden in the most ordinary situations, and it is up to each one of you to discover it.
(St. Josemaria Escriva, 1967/2002, *Passionately Loving the World*)

Domine, ut videam.
(Handbook of Prayers, 2001, p. 548)

DEDICATION

It is God who said, 'let light shine out of darkness,' that has shone into our hearts to enlighten them with the knowledge of God's glory, the glory on the face of Christ.

(The New Jerusalem Bible, 1985, 2CO: 4:6)

This work is dedicated to:

John Paul II

(1920 – 2005)

Pope, Priest, Phenomenologist
whose text taught me a way of seeing
that reveals the mystery of God
in the
lived experience of the human face
of Christ.

"Ultimately, the mystery of language brings us back to the inscrutable mystery of God himself."

(John Paul II, Gift and Mystery, 1996, p. 7)

And to

Bishop Thomas J. Welsh, D.D., J.C.D.

Bishop, Founder, Teacher, and Father

Who makes the face of Christ present,

And shepherds me with love.

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**CHAPTER ONE: TURNING TO THE PHENOMENON:
“PUT OUT INTO THE DEEP OF THE NET”**

I believe in all that has never yet been spoken.
I want to free what waits within me
So that what no one has dared to wish for
May for once spring clear
Without my contriving...

Then in these swelling and ebbing currents,
These deepening tides moving out, returning,
I will sing you as no one ever has,
Streaming through widening channels
Into the open sea.
(Rilke, 1905/1996, p. 58)

When I began working in the field of distance education in 1983, we ran printing presses, filled three-ring binders with paper called correspondence courses, and partnered with the postal system. Students interacted with black and white text in binders and books, connected to faculty through stamps and envelopes, worked alone and partnered with solitude. Today our students sit at computer workstations typing text on computer screens that reveal connections and community beyond geographical boundaries—presence in distance.

Computer-mediated communication has opened, widened, and transformed the field of distance education. On the threshold of the new millennium, I, too, was caught by the Net and two years later, John Paul II summoned the Catholic Church to cross a new threshold—to put out into the deep of the Net—a reference to the Internet, as a “gateway—a new forum...a new frontier” (*Message for the 36th World Communications Day*, par. 2) for the New Evangelization of the new millennium, a contemplation of the face of Christ. *Duc in altum*, to “put out into the deep,” (Luke 5:4) were the words in Latin that Christ used to lure Peter, a fisherman, to become a fisher of men—the same

words John Paul II used to lure the Church into new ways to catch the mind and heart of the twenty-first century.

As an adult educator, a researcher, and catechist, I have been drawn to wonder about the lived experience of adults in the third Christian millennium who are called to contemplate the face of Christ in a community that dwells in a place called cyberspace. What are the contours of the online community, the landscape of disembodied human presence made present through technology? Is there presence in distance? Like John Paul II, I ask in what way the face of Christ emerges and the voice of Christ is heard through text on a computer screen. If the Internet in the twenty-first century is the fisherman's net of the first century, then how does the Church make the face of Christ present in distance? I have put out into the deep of the Net.

The Lure

On the eve of the third millennium, the net that caught my imagination was a web-based three-week online interactive seminar that The Catholic Distance University piloted with the Catholic Diocese of Arlington in Northern Virginia. I had worked for seventeen years teaching with paper, and now I set out to educate catechists on a computer screen. The term *catechist* is Greek, meaning one who teaches through oral instruction, like Christ, who taught his disciples in first century Palestine through conversation and example as recorded in the Gospels. The *catechist* is called to hand on an encounter with Christ and proclaim it weekly as a volunteer teacher in a local parish. Twenty years had passed since I, too, had encountered the face of Christ and volunteered to teach my encounter to teenagers at a parish.

The Lure of the Net

The call to teach is an invitation to put out into the deep, *duc in altum*, to form new relationships that transform teachers as much as students. The call to catechize is

the call to proclaim a relationship. John Paul II reminded Catholics in 2001: "We shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 39). My call as a *catechist* transformed me from teacher to student, seeking to contemplate the face of Christ more deeply, and from student to teacher, eager to proclaim the face of Christ, to a new field of education called distance. I am a catechist who proclaims my encounter through a laptop computer connected to the Internet. I am a researcher of presence in distance.

The Catholic Distance University (CDU), established in 1983 as the Church's first attempt at institutionalizing distance in the United States, located itself near Washington, D.C., the geographical and most technologically developed capital in the world at that time. CDU offered a modern response to Christ's command to "Teach all Nations," using the technologies of distance education—printing presses in the 1980's and the Internet in 2000. For me it proclaimed presence in distance. How does distance become presence? How is the encounter with Christ handed on electronically through text on a computer screen?

Distance as Roots

Someone once described me as a suitcase. I am the product of distance. I was a child continually on the move. My own education began with kindergarten on the Island of Okinawa. My youth began in Germany, with stopovers in Oklahoma, Georgia, Massachusetts, Illinois, Texas, and New York. High school was spent in Verona, Italy, the longest sojourn in one place since birth, yet, in language and ethnicity, never home. Five generations of educators flow through my bloodstream spanning Ireland, Italy, and the East Coast of the United States, yet I am the first in the family with *distance* in my identity. My suitcase has become a laptop computer that stores my life on a microchip and lures me into worlds and relationships that do not require travel at all.

Dwayne Huebner in *The Call of the Transcendent* urges the educator to remain open to the transcendent by “studying outside one’s own discipline, teaching in a new field, becoming someone else’s student, the discipline of trying to get inside someone else’s skin” (1999, p. 348). How has the field of distance education lured me into the transcendent? CDU is modeled on “open universities” whose economies of scale deliver higher education to the masses through cost effective distance education technologies and open admissions. Adults anywhere in the world enroll at any time of the year, at any hour of the day or night. The invitation to encounter the face of Christ is extended through the oral and written Tradition of the Catholic Church—its historical, doctrinal, moral, spiritual, and liturgical traditions—transmitted through text on a computer screen. How do words on a computer screen that symbolize the Person of the Word, the *Logos*, transform the reader of the word, I wonder? Can contemplation occur through technology?

The field of distance education highlights separation in its name. Yet technology overcomes distance; the lure of the Net reveals connection, convenience, and community. What is the nature of the technologically mediated connection and who chooses to be connected through distance, I wonder? What is the essence of community in the lure of the Net?

What is Distance?

O’Donohue (1999) believes that the word “distance” has hidden within it the natural desire for belonging. He writes:

There is some strange sense in which distance and closeness are sisters, two sides of the one experience. Distance awakens longing; closeness is belonging. Yet they are always in a dynamic interflow with each other. (1999, p. xxii)

To tell others that I work in the field of distance education is both accurate and troubling. Our students tell us they dislike attending a university named *Distance*. The

term *distance* highlights the geographical separation between instructor and learner. How have I been drawn to a field of education that highlights geographical dispersion? What is significant today in geographical separation when education through technology is no longer about place? I have learned that the meaning of distance in education is the overcoming of geographical distance through technology—bringing people to education in spite of geographical separation.

The etymology of *distance* reveals the discomfort it hides. The earliest meaning from Old French is discord, quarrel, the condition of being at variance, disagreement, dissension, dispute, debate, a meaning which after 1600 became the state of estrangement, coolness. Various current meanings include difference, diversity of rank or position, remoteness, aloofness, separation—the opposite of intimacy and familiarity (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 517). Is the language of distance in education discordant to students who through technology are brought into community? In what way is the face of Christ revealed through the education of discord, disagreement, and remoteness? How does the language of distance reveal the longing to belong? Edward Casey (1993) makes a similar point that distance is not necessarily about near or far:

The far is not the distant. Even if distance sometimes contributes substantially to effects of farness, the sheer amount of distance does not guarantee farness. Things remote in space and time can enter our near sphere, most notably through technological intermediaries such as telescopes and telephones, cameras, and television sets. (p. 60)

Casey rings true as I watch the Internet bring distance close. It calls me to wonder how persons at a distance experience closeness through presence mediated through technology. What is the essence of human presence without the body? How is a community formed from people who live at a distance, but yearn for presence, driven by the search to contemplate the face of Christ?

Distance as Relationship

In 1972 Dr. Michael Moore (2007a) proposed the theory of transactional distance to capture empirically the essence of *distance* in distance education. After examining thousands of distance education courses in a wide variety of subjects, he concludes that *distance* is a phenomenon that is pedagogical, not geographical. “To repeat, transactional distance is a theory of the pedagogy of distance education, not a theory of its organizations” (p. 91), Moore emphasizes. As long as there is a learner and a teacher and a means of communication, there will be some degree of transactional distance: “Thus the transaction in distance education is the interplay of teachers and learners in environments that have the special characteristic of their being spatially separate from one another” (p. 91). Moore described the special teaching and learning behaviors required by distance as a continuum between structure and dialogue. Correspondence courses, for example, provide high structure and low dialogue, while interactive online courses provide lower structure and higher dialogue:

...it bears repeating that transactional distance is relative rather than absolute. Teaching-learning programs are not dichotomously either *distance* or *not distance*, but they have *more distance* or *less distance*. One has more dialogue than another and less structure than another, allowing greater learner autonomy than another. (p. 91)

Transaction is a term that originated with John Dewey and developed further by Boyd and Apps (1980). In Moore’s theory, distance education moves into the realm of relationship between structure and dialogue within the overall concept of education as a pedagogical transaction:

It should be clear that the extent of dialogue and the degree of structure varies from course to course. It is not simply a matter of the technology, though that definitely imposes limitations; it also depends on the teaching philosophy of the instructor, the capacity of learners, and the nature of the subject. (p. 93)

Alan Tait (2003), Dean of Education at the United Kingdom Open University, more recently confirmed the validity of Moore's theory in assessing web-based distance education: "...the core of distance in Moore's theory — that the space between the learner and the structure of teaching must be mediated by dialogue, offering the learner the opportunity to be an active participant, remains valid..." (p. 96). What is the essence of the human relationships that are formed online within the pedagogical transaction called distance...between the continuum of structure and dialogue, I wonder?

Distance as Presence

My passion is the person in the online pedagogical transaction called distance. In what way is the person present to other persons in the online learning community? What is the meaning of human presence, of *Being* online, mediated through web-based technology? Heidegger (1927/1993a) examines the meaning of *Being* as presence in *Being and Time*. As he points out, even though we live with an understanding of being, it remains "shrouded in darkness proving the fundamental necessity of recovering the question of the meaning of 'Being'" (Heidegger, 1927/1993a, p. 44). What does "Being online" mean to members of an online learning community? How does being present online make the face of Christ present? Is presence online both human and divine? My questions dwell in the *Being* of beings online.

Krell (1993) points out that Heidegger's thought encloses a double theme of presence (*Sein*) and disclosure (*Aletheia*); however, like O'Donohue's (1999) description of distance and closeness as two sisters, Heidegger's (1927/1993a) thought also encompasses the tension of presence and absence, unconcealment and obscurity:

Coming to presence suggests an absence before and after itself, so that withdrawal and departure must always be thought together with *Sein* as presencing; disclosedness or unconcealment suggests a surrounding obscurity, so that darkness and oblivion must be thought together with *Aletheia*. (p. 32)

What is the nature of presence and disclosure within the absence of the body in the online community? In what way do the limitations of presence and unconcealment mediated through technology enhance or diminish the longing to belong in the online community that seeks to contemplate the face of Christ? How is Christ present in distance?

Distance as Place

Four years of high school in Vicenza, Italy required a daily train ride from Verona and two years of boarding. I traveled back and forth to the home of Palladio, the Renaissance architect, whose neoclassical architecture in downtown Vicenza and elegant villas in the surrounding foothills of the Piedmont contrasted sharply with the transient, utilitarian boxes we inhabited at the military installation that housed our Department of Defense high school. We were a small island of middle-class America in the culturally rich Piedmont region of northern Italy.

Despite our efforts to be American, our bodies absorbed the language, culture, landscape, and diet of Italy's northern foothills. As Casey (1993) points out, "Thanks precisely to the familiarity established by habitual body memories, we get our bearings in a place of residence, the interior analogue of orientation in open landscape" (p. 117). Had my body's early memories of home as an island of distance in the language and landscape of Italy made my many trips to Rome as an adult educator feel like coming home? How had the scenic foothills of northern Italy formed my recognition of home on the Vatican hill to the south? Did my body feel at home in education whose place was a journey of longing to belong, of education whose essence was a pilgrimage through technology, a search for Christ through the screen of my laptop? Is presence in distance a place? Is the contemplation of the face of Christ my home?

The Longing to Belong

Casey (1993) acknowledges that the dimension of wandering is part of the placeness of the human condition:

Movement is therefore intrinsic to place" (p. 280). If we think of the verb "to dwell" in a wide and essential sense, then it denotes the way in which humans fulfill their wandering from birth to death on earth under the sky. Everywhere the wandering remains the essence of dwelling...man is a wanderer. As *homo viator*, he is always on the way. (p. 357)

O'Donohue (1999) believes that the inner voice of eternal longing is what confirms us as relentless pilgrims on the earth. What had I longed for in my education because of distance? What captured my imagination in frequent travel and no permanent home? How had the sound of languages I only partially understood from the age of four fed my excitement for communities that spanned oceans? Did my suitcase confirm my ability to overcome distance with closeness? For what had I longed to belong?

O'Donohue believes that the deepest nature of the soul is relationship. "Deep down in each of us is a huge desire to belong...Consequently it is your soul that longs to belong; it is also your soul that makes all belonging possible" (1999, p. xxiii). For me, education of the soul became the passion of my field; I became the teacher of the longing to belong, connecting souls through technology who were geographically separated but longed to belong.

Technology as Revelation

I watch spellbound as text pours onto my computer screen in September 2000, the first online interactive seminar we pilot at The Catholic Distance University. I know I have been caught by the Net. The identities of a hundred catechists I have never met introduce themselves as text on my computer screen. Pounding the keys of my laptop

in response—a silent voice calling out through technology—I project and share my own identity through abstract symbols on a computer screen that trigger a myriad of human emotions as my fingers move systematically across the keyboard. Computer monitors, illuminated at all hours of the day and night, become the gateway to a new world of human connection and disembodied presence. For the first time, distance education becomes the lived experience of presence and community, magical text from the movement of my fingers that lure us into relationship, mediated through technology. Is this not what Heidegger (1953/1993c) means when he writes:

Technology is not equivalent to the essence of technology...the essence of technology is by no means anything technological...Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm for the essence of technology will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth. (p. 318)

I wonder at the nature of the community we form online. What is the truth of this community? I marvel at my eagerness to be present, to read what others have written in response to my postings, the fun of using text to create a persona, the sufferings revealed by persons I have never met, the humor, the wisdom of thoughtful reflections, the generosity of late-night responses, requests for prayers, the love of God reflected in biographies that draw me in. What has technology enabled us to form through our text-based conversations? What has technology revealed to us about ourselves? What is the *Being* of our beings through text and technology?

The Lure of Text

Gadamer (1960/1999) discloses the mystery and lure of text:

The mode of being of a text has something unique and incomparable about it...Nothing is so strange, and at the same time so demanding, as the written word. Not even meeting speakers of a foreign language can be compared with this strangeness, since the language of gesture and of sound is always in part immediately intelligible. The written word and what partakes of it—literature is

the intelligibility of mind transferred to the most alien medium. Nothing is so purely the trace of the mind as writing, but nothing is so dependent on the understanding mind either. In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place: the transformation of something alien and dead into total contemporaneity and familiarity. (p. 163)

Gadamer captures the essence of relationship within written text that I, too, discover in our text-generated online conversations. Human presence is captured in the play between the written text and the understanding mind. As members of the first text-based online community at CDU, we dwell in the space that opens in the relationship between networked minds and their traces recorded in written text on a computer screen. The search for meaning within those traces creates the reality of dialogue and relationship. One of our graduate students comments on the difference between being online and being in a class:

Today more is shared in our online classes than in a classroom. The bell never rings in the online class. We have the luxury of re-reading posts, printing out conversations, circling, underlining, processing, responding, reflecting—there is a development of thought that takes too much time in a regular classroom.

The phenomenon of writing is central to the experience of the online student who is called to make himself or herself present to others through written text as the medium of communication, instead of the traditional face-to-face encounter of the classroom. Dr. Linda Harasim (1993), an expert on learning networks, notes: "Freeing people from the bonds of physical appearance may serve to enable communication at the level of ideas" (as cited in Carabajal, LaPointe, & Gunawardena, 2003, p. 222). As an online student from Virginia points out, "The online connection provides a bit of anonymity which allows for a freer exchange without the worry of speaking up in a class." Another student writes, "I have the advantage of the permanency of the written word...not simply my notes on the materials, but the actual student discussions. It is a wonderful balance of community and privacy that a student of theology needs."

Gadamer (1960/1999) comments:

In actual fact, writing is central to the hermeneutical phenomenon insofar as its detachment both from the writer or author and from a specifically addressed recipient or reader gives it a life of its own...The understanding of something written is not a repetition of something past but the sharing of a present meaning. (p. 392)

Gadamer captures the power of the hermeneutical reality of the online community that bases its essence on written text. As he notes in his definition of all text as literature, "Time and space seem to be superseded. People who can read what has been handed down in writing produce and achieve the sheer presence of the past" (p. 164). An online student comments, "There is something about writing rather than talking that deepens the process. It gives me the time to put more thought into the matter, and to be more precise in expressing myself."

Dr. Joseph Walther (1996), a professor of Communications at Cornell University, examines research on the phenomenon of *hyperpersonal* communication in text-based online communication that surpasses normal interpersonal communication. He explains the effect of limited social cues in the online community: "Whatever subtle social context cues or personality cues did appear in the [online] computer-mediated communication took on great value...When social partners were not proximal, the salience of group membership became stronger yet" (p. 18). He quotes a study of couples engaged to be married who were living together, close by, or far apart during their period of engagement:

The percentage of the couples' communication that occurred face-to-face was negatively associated with their ratings of marital adjustment and idealization. The percentage of communication exchanged as letters showed very large, positive correlations with adjustment, communication, idealization, and love. The more that written communication was exchanged via the asynchronous, minimal-cue medium of writing, the more favorable the partners' perceptions of each other, their communication, and their affection. (p. 27)

This study supports Gadamer's (1960/1999) claim that deciphering and interpreting text involves a miracle, which is a way of emphasizing the richness in interpretation, the play between the traces of the mind revealed in writing and the process of interpretation of the understanding mind. "That is why the capacity to read, to understand what is written, is like a secret art, even a magic that frees and binds us..." (p. 164).

John Donne (1896/2006) confirms the same phenomenon in his poem, *A Valediction Forbidding Mourning*, written to his wife as a testimony to their love that is strengthened in the distance of physical separation:

Dull sublunary lovers' love—
Whose soul is sense—cannot admit
Of absence, 'cause it doth remove
The thing which elemented it.

But we by a love so much refined,
That ourselves know not what it is,
Inter-assured of the mind,
Care less, eyes, lips, and hands to miss.

Our two souls therefore, which are one,
Though I must go, endure not yet
A breach, but an expansion,
Like gold to aery thinness beat.

If they be two, they are two so
As stiff twin compasses are two,
Thy soul, the fix'd foot, makes no show
To move, but doth, if th' other do.

And though it in the centre sit,
Yet, when the other far doth roam,
It leans, and hearkens after it,
And grows erect, as that comes home. (2006, pp. 51-52,
<http://www.luminarium.org/sevenlit/donne/mourning.htm>)

Like gold that expands on being pulled apart or twin compasses that become more strongly rooted in place because of distance, Donne captures the truth of distance that reveals closeness. This is the hermeneutical play that creates meaning, of “truth as openness to being” that Heidegger (1953/1993c) describes as the essence of technology. Donne concludes, “Thy firmness makes my circle just, And makes me end where I begun” (p. 52). In fact, because of distance, their love does not end where it began, but grows stronger because of their presence in distance. “Care less, eyes, lips and hands to miss,” remarkably without physical presence to one another, makes their love grow stronger. Huebner (1999) writes, “Every mode of knowing is also a mode of being in relationship. It is a relationship of mutual care and love” (p. 349).

Presence as Relationship

What is the essence of presence in distance? What is the essence of a relationship of mutual care and love mediated through technology? How does distance become closeness in the online community? Dr. Namin Shin (2002), a professor at the Center for Research in Distance and Adult Learning at the University of Hong Kong, hearkens back to Moore’s theory of distance as a pedagogical transaction. She challenges the concept of presence in distance education usually defined as the amount of interaction that takes place in the online community. Instead, she defines presence as relationship, using the work of Munro (1998) whose extensive analysis of distance education literature links student satisfaction and student learning achievement with the teacher-learner relationship:

While learning activities occur at a distance from the educator, the learner’s sense of the educator’s presence and the character of their dialogic relationship influence learning. Education involves a relationship, not just the transmission of information. (Munro, as cited in Shin, 2002, p. 122)

Shin proposes that transactional presence is the degree to which a distance student perceives the availability of and connectedness with teachers, peer students, and the educational institution, while interaction is viewed as an activity that may or may not result in or from a high degree of transactional presence. She cites Munro:

Obviously presence need not mean face-to-face contact, and the degree of presence may have more to do with the overall educator-learner relationship...than it has to do with whether the educator and the learner correspond, talk on the telephone, meet face-to-face, or send messages back and forth via computers. (Shin, p. 132)

Spiritual Presence

The subject matter of spirituality in the text-based online community is an area of growing interest among researchers. Palloff and Pratt (1999) describe the online learning community as a spiritual community because it is a human community: "Everything we do as humans, including our interaction with technology, is spiritual" (p. 42). When presence in the computer-mediated community is viewed as relationship rather than interaction, it opens to the dimension of spiritual presence in the online community of longing to belong.

Huebner (1999) describes the spiritual as a mode of "being open, vulnerable, and available to the internal and external world" (p. 349). Dr. Heidi Campbell (2005a) identifies four typologies of online spiritual communities from her research on the Internet as a spiritual space: "online community as religious identity, spiritual network, support network, and worship space" (p. 129). She comments, "...increasing numbers of people are seeing the Internet as sacred space, and Internet technology as possessing a spiritual quality" (p. 129). John Paul II's (2005) final reflection on the Internet opens to the potential of relationship with God in the online faith community of longing to belong: "It provides a providential opportunity to reach people everywhere; it overcomes barriers of time, space, and language; and it offers all who search, the

possibility of entering into dialogue with the mystery of God" (*Rapid Development*, par. 5).

Savery and Berne (1988) use examples from literature and early Christian writings to define human presence as physical, psychological, and spiritual. They give examples of spiritual presence in the writings of contemporary psychiatrist Victor Frankl (1959), as well as early Christian writers and theologians such as St. Gregory the Great (540 – 604), St. Gregory Nazianzus (325 – 389) and St. Teresa of Avila (1515 – 1582). Victor Frankl describes the spiritual presence of his deceased wife who helped sustain him in surviving a Nazi concentration camp: "I heard her answering me, saw her smile, her frank encouraging look" (p. 11). Savery and Berne describe this as spiritual presence.

A member of the CDU online community describes presence in similar language: "Just as we are in communion with the angels and the saints at prayer, so too in the online community we are present to each other. We can not see one another, but we know that our fellow students are praying for us and with us" (Personal communication, 2006). St. Teresa of Avila acknowledges the reality of friendship after death with Peter of Alcantara in her autobiography: "Since Peter's death it has been the Lord's good pleasure that I should have more interaction with him than I had during his life" (1961, p. 13). How does the technology of the online community open to the reality of spiritual presence like that of Donne and his wife, and Teresa and Peter, who discover a strong spiritual presence without the body? In what way, I wonder, does spiritual presence increase when physical presence is not present?

Where Does Time Go?

Time changes in the world of the electronically mediated learning community. In their book, *Building Learning Communities in Cyberspace*, Palloff and Pratt (1999) describe two types of online communication: synchronous (all participants log on at the same

time to simulate the classroom experience), or asynchronous (participants log on at any time) and, like most online educators, they recommend the asynchronous model. After all, if online learning serves the convenience of the learner, why restrict the learner to a specific time to log on, especially if the learning community is made up of students representing a range of time zones? In addition, logging on at the convenience of the learner allows for more reflection and the potential for a more thoughtful discussion.

Dr. Linda Harasim (1993) has noted that asynchronous communication

[allows] participants to take time to formulate their ideas into a more composed and thoughtful response, contributing to improved quality of communication. This attribute is especially advantageous for educational and business network activities, but it is also important in the social network, where the time to reflect before responding can enhance the exchange. (as cited in Walther, 1996, p. 26)

What happens to time when students become members of an online global conversation in an asynchronous network? What is the nature of asynchronous time in the online learning community that fills the present moment with twenty-four hours? With an online community that spans the globe, two people in conversation who live six hours apart are not inconvenienced by either time zone. The community conversation in an asynchronous dialogue continues from morning to night, accommodating early morning risers and night owls at the same time. What happens to time in a community that overcomes the oppression of synchronous time? What happens to the community? What is the hermeneutical opening in the letting go of chronological time? What is revealed in the essence of technology?

Heidegger, in *Being and Time*, (1927/1993a) discovers that the essence of *Being*, or *Dasein*, in human beings is *temporality*: "The meaning of the Being of that being we call *Dasein* proves to be temporality... Time must be brought to light and genuinely grasped as the horizon of every understanding and interpretation of Being" (p. 60). Heidegger rejects the unconcealment of time as eternity. Yet, even though the participants in the asynchronous online community each live in the chronological reality of a particular

time zone, when they are interacting online, they are present to one another beyond any particular time zone. Heidegger describes Being as presence: "Beings are grasped in their Being as 'presence'; that is to say, they are understood with regard to a definite mode of time, the present" (p. 70). However, in the electronic community, the present remains presence for as long as the technology works and the discussions continue, until the teacher presses a key to prevent further postings. Palloff and Pratt call it the "luxury of time" (1999, p. 48).

An online graduate student at CDU reminds us, "The bell never rings at CDU." Graduate students in Australia and New Zealand inquire in the online Café why we persist in calling the September semester "fall" and the January semester "spring?" Only the software indicates the time and date of a posting. How is the present more present when a moment in time lasts a week? What is the meaning of a calendar when the seasons don't change? In what way does asynchronicity deepen human dialogue? How does technology overcome temporality by moving time into eternity in the human experience online?

Questioning the Lure

Heidegger (1927/1993a) begins his examination of the meaning of *Being in Being and Time* by questioning the question: "Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought. Questioning is a knowing search for beings in their thatness and whatness" (p. 45). As the field of web-based distance education grows in popularity and availability, so too do the questions.

In 2003 Carabjal, LaPointe, and Gunawardena report that few studies exist on group development mediated through technology: "Little is known about group development in asynchronous text-based settings" (p. 230). They note the negative connotations in distance—the longing without belonging—that characterizes existing research:

Existing research appears founded on the underlying assumptions that group development in the traditional face-to-face environment represents the ideal situation; and, therefore, group development in the online environment occurs within a less-than-ideal or a deficiency perspective...these unexamined assumptions overlook the strengths of online group development—equalization of participation, greater diversity, and more thoughtful elaboration of ideas, and more time for reflection and inquiry. These strengths are actually the basic components of critical thinking and cognitive presence and are considered indicators of high levels of thinking, of deep and meaningful learning. (p. 230)

Research questions have moved from exploring characteristics of the online learner (Fahy & Ally, 2005; Lee & Gibson, 2003) to interaction and learning outcomes (LaPointe, 2003), social presence (Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Tu & McIsaac, 2002), the formation of groups and communities online and their relationship to learning outcomes (Conrad, 2002a, 2005b; Mann, 2003; Wang, Sierra & Folger, 2003), the community of inquiry model for facilitating social, cognitive, and teaching presence (Garrison, Anderson & Archer, 2003), facilitating cognitive presence and deep learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005), and the use of the online network as a spiritual space (Campbell, 2005a; Esselman, 2004; Kong, 2001). Woods and Ebersole (2003) research course design using non-subject-matter-specific discussion boards to build connectedness in the online learning community.

The essence of the experience of presence in an online learning community whose purpose is academic in the pursuit of a graduate degree in theology, as well as formative and spiritual as part of a faith-based spiritual community, remains an unexplored area for research. In what ways does the online community that fosters both cognitive and spiritual growth strengthen deep, transformative learning and contribute to religious experience? What are the bonds of this community that longs to belong? Do these bonds participate in the Church's understanding of herself as *communio*, even when human presence is mediated electronically? In what ways does the online

community provide an appropriate setting for adult faith development? What is essential to the online community that longs to contemplate the face of Christ?

Technology and the Longing to Belong

For seventeen years, my job was to make the face of Christ present through the nineteenth century technology of printed text. In correspondence education there are very few conversations. Time is only my time, not your time. As educators of distance, we were Catholic, but our history was Methodist.

The Evolution of the Technology of Text

The Methodists opened Chautauqua in 1874, the fruit of a partnership between a Midwestern entrepreneur and a bishop who shared the hunger for higher education and the desire to give volunteer Sunday school teachers, *catechists*, formal training in educational theory and practice, and theology. They created an annual weeklong summer adult religious education program on the idyllic shores of Lake Chautauqua, New York, combining the lure of recreation and natural beauty with the hunger to contemplate the face of Christ.

Within four years the founders were lured by the technology of print and a new rail transportation and postal system that opened to year-around education and the possibility of earning a college degree by correspondence. They added the Chautauqua Literary and Scientific Circle (CLSC) in 1878, described as “the most influential of all [Chautauqua’s] educational experiments” (Morrison, 1974, p. 53). Their innovative program of reading, discussion, and correspondence courses became Chautauqua University in 1883, the forerunner to the University of Chicago’s extension program that awarded the first accredited academic degrees by correspondence before nineteen hundred, inspired by the dogged determination of Dr. William Rainey Harper, the first president of the University of Chicago.

An eighteen-year-old woman named Kate Fisher Kimball, known as the “Mother Superior of the CLSC,” managed the program. Unobtrusively she launched higher education for the masses. She helped emancipate and educate women who predominated as students in the CLSC. Her programs that combined printed correspondence courses with local face-to-face discussion groups called Circles, became a forerunner to today's hybrid models of online and face-to-face classes at many universities. By 1940, the desire for education and the lure to contemplate the face of Christ had led nearly a million people to join Circles around the globe, extending from "Labrador to Argentina, from Puerto Rico to Ceylon, from Russia to Korea, Europe, China, India, Turkey, Japan, and South Africa" (Morrison, 1974, p. 69). In the United States, twelve federal prisons and the Chickasaw Indian reservation had Circles. In one century of educational history, the lure to contemplate the face of Christ and the longing to belong through technology evolved from college degrees delivered through the technology of printed text to graduate degrees delivered through the technology of text on computer screens.

In what way, I wonder, has the evolution of technology opened the nineteenth century Chautauqua Circle into the twenty-first century online learning community of The Catholic Distance University? Does the lure of contemplation change with changes in technology? What is the essence of contemplating the face of Christ without the face-to-face human encounter? How is presence without the body in adult faith formation and education similar to the lived experience of the face of Christ sacramentally present in the Catholic Church? What is the essence of human presence without the human body being present?

The lived experience of printed text is silence. Dialogue occurs in the silence between the learner and the written text and between the learner and the instructor, who also communicate by text separated sometimes by weeks or even months. A student of printed text describes herself as, “a little boat bobbing alone in a sea of

theology; a lone warrior laboring in solitude” (Personal Communication, 2005). The interactivity of silence is the desert journey that only those whose motivation comes from within enables them to persist and succeed. They are the few who dwell in the richness of the miracle of text that Gadamer (1960/1999) describes, the relationship between the trace of the mind and the understanding that creates for them a meaningful relationship. Chautauqua also confirmed the struggle of persistence in the solitude of printed text. By 1892, the Chautauqua University and its degree-granting status were abandoned; only ten percent of the thousands of Circle members actually graduated (Morrison, 1974).

Teaching the Face through Printed Text

Yet the lure of using technology in search of the face of Christ is almost as old as Christ himself. According to educational historians (Lockmiller, 1971) St. Paul is the first to use the technology of printed text to respond to the longing to belong. His letters are theological treatises to the Christian communities in Asia Minor in the early years after Christ's death that provide continuing education and moral formation while he continues his travels among those who have not yet discovered Christ. Paul's technology of text achieves permanence in temporality as it continues to reveal the presence of Christ today as part of the Church's written revelation in Sacred Scripture.

Lockmiller (1971, p. 449), writing for the *Encyclopedia of Education*, described popes as distance educators. As vicars of Christ the Teacher—substitutes, representatives acting in place of Christ (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 3623)—they are teachers of distance. Peter, the first Pope, was a contemporary of Christ who used the technology of text to keep Christ and his teachings present to the early Church: “Without having seen him, you love him; though you do not now see him you believe in him and rejoice with unutterable and exalted joy” (*New Testament and the Psalms*, 2006, 1 Pt: 8-9). The title, *Pope*, is from the Old English meaning *Papa, Daddy*. Teaching

is part of being a father, a daddy. St. Peter composed two letters of instruction in the first millennium. John Paul II writes twenty-seven letters of instruction at the threshold of the third millennium. In what way does the technology of the Internet open wider the arms of a Catholic Church whose daddy is a teacher? In what ways, I wonder, do the popes of the third millennium become *Papas* of the global community formed from the longing to belong through the lure of electronically mediated communication? How can text transmitted electronically create an authentic community of persons that transcends cultural boundaries in the contemplation of the face of Christ? Editable text on a computer screen that limits the projection of presence in the online community also opens to the reflective experience of contemplation, so essential to the study of theology. Unlike the classroom, online discussion is an invitation without time limit; discussion is captured permanently in text for review, reflection, and remembering.

Another adult learner in the graduate program, a Ph.D. in psychology in his professional life, describes his experience of "presence" online:

I have regularly felt present only as a symbolic entity in my online classes; only my name signifies who I am. Over time, our personas may emerge as a function of what we write in class discussions. Certainly our writing does convey some part of us. However, that is still seeing through a glass darkly, in my opinion. I think that human interaction is far more than the sum of any amount of exchanged electrons.

How do I account for the differences in the experience of human presence without the body in the online community? What are the human characteristics that draw some to the online experience of community and disappoint others, just as the technology of written text worked for some and not for many?

The Lure of the Internet

Most adult learners today are accustomed to navigating the Internet and the Web. Some educators characterize the significance of the breakthrough in web-based

technology that empowers learners to connect and interact with one another synchronously or asynchronously, as equivalent in significance to education as the invention of the printing press, (Berge & Collins, 1995). McLuhan and Fiore noted in 1967, "Print technology fostered and encouraged a fragmenting process, of specialization and detachment. [Electronic] technology fosters and encourages unification and involvement...we have become irrevocably involved with, and responsible for, each other" (pp. 8, 24). A graduate adult learner in the online campus remarks, "My faith is stronger because of the other students. How great it is that we can vent together about the world we live in, or be comforted by those who are going through similar situations I face; the online community has given us a common place to share ourselves and our faith."

The Internet and the Second Vatican Council

At the same time that the Catholic bishops of the world were concluding their deliberations at the close of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in 1969, the Pentagon launched the first computer network—ARPANET—to enable decentralization as a military strategy to avoid combat damage in time of war. Do military researchers recognize the irony of accomplishing a strategy of decentralization through interactive networking? As Harold Rheingold (2000) notes about the development of computer technology, "A continuing theme throughout the history of computer-mediated communication (CMC) is the way people adapt technologies designed for one purpose to suit their own, very different, communication needs" (p. xxii).

Did the Bishops of the Second Vatican Council anticipate that computer networks being tested by the Pentagon would make the face of Christ present on computer screens around the world? Or that dialogue will link members of the Church from opposite ends of the globe twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week? Did they envision text that reveals the face of Christ on computer screens that lure a sheep

rancher in Montana, a farmer in Texas, a mother of six children in Australia, a nurse in New Zealand, a Navy pilot on an aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean, and a pediatrician in Philadelphia to a professor in Scranton, Pennsylvania? Did they wonder, as I do, if digitized dialogue has the power to bring about communication that “at its most profound level is the giving of self in love” (Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communications, 1971a, p. 9)?

The root word from the Latin, *communica*, means to make common to many, to share, impart, divide, to give to another as a partaker...to impart, confer, transmit something intangible (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 485). How does one give oneself to others in a community that exists only through technology? In what way does digitized communication, the giving of self in love through technology, become communion, *communio*? What is the essence of the bond of the unity of the online community? Does this community share a life beyond the technology that created it? In what ways does technology transform the human person from distance to community?

Dr. Mark Giese (1998), Assistant Professor of Communications at the University of Houston, reflected on his membership in an online community and the many similarities between real life and cyberspace: “The interactions and the friendships I have made there are no less real for the fact that I have never met any of these individuals face-to-face or because the place where I go to conduct these interactions has no physical existence” (p. 25). Rheingold (2000) pointed out how the online virtual community impacts his life beyond the computer screen: “Not only do I inhabit my virtual communities; to the degree that I carry around their conversations in my head and begin to mix it up with them in real life, my virtual communities also inhabit my life. I’ve been colonized; my sense of family at the most fundamental level has been virtualized” (p. xxv). Rheingold’s reflection introduces another domain of questioning that calls for further research: What is the impact of the online community on the real communities of those who belong to the computer-mediated community?

Catechizing Distance and Community

Catechesis for the Christian is a lifelong process of contemplating the face of Christ, of being transformed by the encounter, and communicating the transformation to others. It is an invitation to grow in knowledge and love through an encounter with the *Logos*, the living Word of God, Jesus Christ. Pope Benedict XVI (2007a) in his recent book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, describes the unique exchange that occurs when one accepts the invitation to grow in the knowledge of God:

Knowledge of God is possible only through the gift of God's love becoming visible, but this gift too has to be accepted. God conveys knowledge that makes demands on us; it not only or even primarily adds to what we know, but it changes our lives. It is a knowledge that enriches us with a gift. (p. 194)

Huebner (1999) describes the integration of knowledge into love as the continual creation or recreation of the universe: "Every mode of knowing is participation in the continual creation of the universe—of one's self, of others, of the dwelling places of the world. It is co-creation" (p. 350).

Catechesis: Conversation and Example

Catechesis begins with Christ who in three years calls, instructs, and forms disciples through conversation and example. Esselman (2004) characterizes the pedagogy of Christ as "calling his followers into a unique relationship of conversion through conversation" (p. 164). Can the pedagogy of Christ be transmitted today through the conversation of text on a computer screen I wonder? This process of *catechesis* constitutes a dimension of the Church's mission of evangelization commanded by Christ at the end of the Synoptic Gospels: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, and teach them all that I have commanded you..." (Mt. 28:19-20). It is a lifelong process of being formed intellectually in the word of God, conforming

one's heart and will to the love of God encountered in the contemplation of the face of Christ, and forming others by instruction and example.

Teresa of Avila tells her sisters: "You must not build upon foundations of prayer and contemplation alone, for, unless you strive after the virtues and practice them, you will never grow to be more than dwarfs" (1961, p. 229). Paul VI, in 1975, summarized the modern pedagogy of *catechesis*: "Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses" (Paul VI, 1975, par. 41). Thus, *catechesis* incorporates education and formation, doing and being, knowing and loving, learning and living the mystery of a transcendent God. How is *catechesis*, I wonder, carried out through text on a computer screen? In what way do I witness my encounter with the face of Christ through an identity reduced to text on a computer screen connected to the Internet? What is the power of language projected through technology?

Gadamer (1960/1999) described the horizon of language as an encounter of the human and divine:

...this variability [of languages] does not preclude all expressions from being a reflection of the thing itself (*forma*). This kind of essential inexactness can be overcome only if the mind rises to the infinite. In the infinite there is, then, only one single thing (*forma*) and one single word (*vocabulum*), namely the ineffable Word of God (*verbum Dei*) that is reflected in everything (*relucet*). (p. 438)

Huebner (1999) also addressed the transcendence of human experience that opens beyond presence and person:

Spirit refers to that which makes it possible to acknowledge that present forms of life—the institutions, relationships, symbols, language, habits—cannot contain the human being...It is an awareness that what we are and what we know can never completely contain what we might be or what we might know. (p. 345)

Community and the Computer-mediated Community

Accompanying the Church's long tradition of the technology of printed text to catechize distance in adult catechesis, the Second Vatican Council recovered the early Christian Church's practice of forming and incorporating new adult members into the Church through a process of engraftment into the Christian community. Recent Church documents increasingly stress the importance of the community:

One of the most valid criteria in the process of adult catechesis, but which is often overlooked, is the involvement of the community which welcomes and sustains adults. Adults do not grow in faith primarily by learning concepts, but by sharing the life of the Christian community, of which adults are members who both give and receive from the community. (*International Council for Catechetics*, 1990, p. 28)

As the Church crosses the threshold of the new Net, I wonder, in what way will the disembodied computer-mediated community embody the community of the early Church? In what ways do linked computers become new Christian communities in the new millennium? What are the contours of these new communities? To what degree do they share in the likeness of traditional Church communities?

The Catholic Church today calls adults to lifelong education and faith formation within the traditional communities of the Church such as the parish, the diocese, recognized ecclesial institutes, and spiritual and charitable works of mercy: "Adults do not grow in faith primarily by learning concepts, but by sharing the life of the Christian community" (*Our Hearts Were Burning Within Us*, 1999, p. 27). As a catechist and researcher of presence in distance, I wonder if the community formed through networked computers is a community that gives and shares life by revealing the face of Christ to those who belong. As more and more adults choose the computer-mediated community for education and spiritual development, the Church must explore these questions. Who is drawn to join an online community in search of the face of Christ, I

ask? How does the online community strengthen or diminish the embodied community? What is the essence of the catechesis of distance? The new evangelization of John Paul II calls us to put out into the deep of the Net.

The Internet is a network. *Network* is a term whose German root refers to “work in which threads, wires, or similar materials are arranged in the fashion of a net, especially a light fabric made of netted threads” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 1916). The term hearkens also to the one who makes nets—a fisherman like St. Peter. John Paul II links Peter’s net to the Internet. The Internet, called the “network of networks” is not only instant worldwide access to information, but also a worldwide network of communication. Connectivity is possible anywhere on the globe, at sea, and even in outer space. The network describes a connection through computer-mediated technology that enables persons to communicate with one another primarily through text. A network is not a community but can open to the development of human relationships through technology that can become a community.

Pope Benedict XVI, then Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (2002), emphasized the universality of the Church’s understanding of herself as community. He referred to the birth of the Church at Pentecost and made the following observation:

At the hour of her birth, the Church is already speaking in every language. The Church Fathers quite rightly interpreted this story of the wonderful gift of languages as a foreshadowing of the *Catholica*—the Church is *kat’holon* from the very first moment—comprehending the whole universe...Luke has added to this list of twelve peoples the Romans; and no doubt he was trying to emphasize further the idea of the whole globe. (pp. 136-137)

The Internet is a new frontier of evangelization for the Church that offers a powerful network of information and communication that reaches throughout the globe. As a researcher of presence in distance who is a catechist, I am called to “put out into the deep of the Net” to go beyond the network of information and communication to

explore the community of relationships, the longing to belong, of those who contemplate the face of Christ through text on a computer screen.

Navigating the New Net

I, too, am an explorer of the new Net, the computer-mediated faith community, wondering about the power of the digital bond to create communion, marveling at the multitude of personalities who gather daily at their computer screens as adult learners, a community held together by the new Net, hoping that the computer-mediated community will empower them to proclaim the encounter more effectively as teachers. What are the strengths and weaknesses, the joys and dangers of the new net whose threshold we have been summoned to cross? In what way does it contribute to the Church's understanding of herself as *communio*? As communion? How does the online community fulfill and create a lifelong hunger for knowledge and union with God in the real life communities they inhabit? How is Christ made present through the new net of the third millennium, a powerful contemporary communication net that encircles the globe, not the fisherman's net on the shores of the Sea of Galilee? How has my keyboard become my rudder? These are the questions that call to me as teacher, learner, witness, and catechist. How many times have I put off going to bed at night because of the call of the online community that shares incredible journeys, heartaches, loneliness, worry, humor, wisdom, and miracles?

A student in 2005 writes, "The sharing of personal stories is so powerful. I have been moved and inspired many times by what my classmates have written... Another student (2005), a corporate compliance executive in Catholic healthcare writes, "Has CDU changed me? Yes, it seems daily. One unique thing about the online sharing with other students is the trust. I've never witnessed anything like it." How can technology foster authentic *catechesis*, a process based on a relationship between the human and the

divine? How has my own journey brought me to God in a place called distance that beckons through a computer screen?

This is the larger question that looms for me. How does the computer-mediated community contemplate the face of Christ? John Paul II in 2002 asked, "Could the Internet's billions of images on a computer screen reveal the face of Christ? Could it be a genuinely human space?" For he warned, "If there is no room for Christ, there is no room for man" (*World Communications Day Message*, 2002, par. 6).

Networked Catechesis

I am a researcher of the lived experience of networked computers, connected by technology to form human communities in search of the face of Christ. The hunger to contemplate the human face of the divine Person drives education to technology to make distance close, to overcome the longing to belong, to make distance presence. Networked computers used for education have been around since the early 1990's, but the use of networked computers for *catechesis*, a response to John Paul II's summons in 2002 to "bravely cross this new threshold, to put out into the deep of the Net..." (*World Communications Day Message*, par. 6) calls me to search and research the essence of the lived experience of presence in distance. I wonder, "Does the online community share the newness of a real Christian community, as the early Church community was new to pagan Rome?" Why does it lure some and not others? In what way does the online community reflect a face-to-face human community? What are its dangers and discoveries? In what way is the real community already a hybrid of the real and the virtual?

The Call of Community

The response of the Church to John Paul II's (2002) vision of the Internet as a new frontier for evangelization is an eagerness to show the face of Christ in the

dissemination of vast amounts of information, teaching, art, history, and current events of the Catholic Church through its website (www.vatican.va), web casts, and online news service. However, the next threshold of the Internet—using networked computers open to human conversation and community as a formal dimension of *catechesis*—has not been crossed and remains to my knowledge unexplored by the Church as a new gateway of engagement of the Gospel and culture. As Sister Timothy Prokes, FSE, (2004), asked at the end of her reflections entitled *Theology and Virtual Reality*: "...What good, what truth is emerging in these new pursuits that needs to be recognized and brought into the patterns of Redemption?" (p. 162).

The field of education continues to witness an explosion of growth in distance education, especially in the United States, as web technology links learners to one another and to faculty throughout the world. Today, according to Michael Lambert (2007), executive director of the Distance Education and Training Council, ninety-six percent of all traditional four-year institutions offer distance education, twenty percent of all students earn degrees online, in this decade distance education grows thirty percent a year, and from 2002 to 2005 the number of distance students has grown from 483,000 to 3.2 million.

Researchers are beginning to examine the use of web-based communities for religious growth and spiritual support (Campbell, 2005b; Esselman, 2004). Empirical studies document evidence of deep learning and understanding in asynchronous online learning communities (Esselman, 2004; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005) as well as a strong sense of support among participants (Conrad, 2005; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000). Both characteristics are very important to *catechesis*. Yet very little research exists on the actual lived experience of membership in an online community whose purpose is both academic and spiritual. As a researcher and catechist of presence in distance, the following question inspires and guides my research: What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?

A Methodology of Presence in Distance

I have chosen the hermeneutic phenomenological method of Max van Manen (2003), a phenomenologist whose methodological orientation addresses the relationship between teacher and learner. Catechesis expresses the relationship of teacher and learner in the context of Christian revelation. Christ is the Teacher from whom all catechesis is modeled. Van Manen calls the researcher to six interwoven activities: (a) Turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world, (b) Investigating experience as we live it, rather than conceptualizing it, (c) Reflecting on essential themes that characterize the phenomenon, (d) Describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting, (e) Maintaining a strong pedagogical relation to the phenomenon, and (f) Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole (pp. 30-31).

Begin With the Question

Van Manen's (2003) method begins with the question, as discussed further in Chapter Three. He invokes Gadamer who described the essence of the question as “the opening up, and keeping open of possibilities” (p. 43). Van Manen describes questioning as a search from deep within the heart concerning a subject that has great significance for us:

Is this not the meaning of research: to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that which is put to question begins to reveal something of its essential nature? (p. 43)

Rilke (1908/2000) spoke about the importance of the question in letters written to a young poet who seeks advice and inspiration: “...have patience with everything that remains unsolved in your heart. Try to love the questions themselves, like locked rooms and like books written in a foreign language...” (p. 35). My question takes up the

question that John Paul II posed to the Church in 2002: "...will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard from this galaxy of sight and sound on millions of computer monitors around the planet?" (par. 6). I ask the question of the catechist who is formed through the technology of the "galaxy of sight and sound," whose door leads through the computer screen: What is the essence of presence and community in search of the face of Christ through computer-mediated technology?

Van Manen (2003) calls the researcher to "live the question, to become the question, to go back again and again to the phenomenon until the question begins to reveal something of its essential nature" (p. 43). His words echo those of Husserl (1907/1999), the father of the philosophical movement of phenomenology:

Phenomenology carries out its clarifications in acts of seeing, determining, and distinguishing sense. It compares, it distinguishes, it connects, it places in relation, it divides into parts, it separates off moments. But it does all this in the act of pure seeing. (p. 43)

What are the parts, the relations, the moments, I ask, of being in a virtual community? What does it mean to search for the face of Christ by giving up my own face in exchange for being present in text? What is the meaning of human presence online in search of divine presence? Theologian, Sister Timothy Prokes (2004) comments, "The understanding of authentic presence is foundational to Catholic faith" (p. 69).

Relationships

Relationship is central to understanding the phenomenon of the online experience. Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) quote Rovai (2002) as finding "a positive significant relationship between a sense of community and cognitive learning" in online courses (p. 135). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) concluded in their study of the community of inquiry model in online learning that "deep learning is the result of

a confluence of social, cognitive, and teaching presence, interaction among ideas, students, and teachers" (p. 144). What is the essence of community online?

I wonder about the relationship to technology. What is the essence of this relationship? Research studies abound on the anxiety that technology presents. My question, hearkening to Heidegger (1953/1993c), is not about technology per se, but about the essence of technology as the art of revealing. What does online technology reveal, I ask, about those who become online learners, its equality of participation, its provision to edit and print dialogue, the opportunity for reflection?

Time

What is the meaning of time in a community that crosses time zones and seasons without influencing the presence of each participant? Pope Benedict XVI (2006c), reflecting on the media as a network facilitating communication, communion, and cooperation, commented: "Technological advances have in certain respects conquered time and space making communication between people separated by vast distances both instantaneous and direct" (*40th World Communications Day Message*, par. 2).

Text

What is the essence of text in online communication, as symbols that reveal the richness of identity that seeks connection, communion, and to be permanently captured as literature? The phenomenological method is text-based. As a researcher and educator, I am at home with text. What will text reveal to me—my text, their text—in the online experience? Van Manen (2003) comments: "The object of human science research is essentially a linguistic project...for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself" (p. 125). Much of the text of this research study is written in the present tense and from the perspective of

first person, which attends to the lived experience of the phenomenon and helps to uncover the mystery of the meaning structures hidden within the text of our conversations and the themes they reveal.

Body and Place

Two other dimensions of the fundamental structure of the lifeworld in phenomenological research are lived space and lived body. These two dimensions highlight significant differences between the real and the virtual. I ask what it means to be present to oneself in one's body and to be present without one's body in the online community. What is the essence of the space where we meet in the online community? What is the role of place in technology, and how do we accept virtual space for place, I wonder?

The Path of the Open Sea

Chapter Two explores the reality of presence in the themes of the lifeworld lived in technology—time, place, body, and other as lived in relationship; adult learners who are present to me online have caught my imagination and deepened my contemplation of the face of Christ. Chapter Two introduces appropriate human science texts in the poetry of Emily Dickinson, John Donne, and Rainer Maria Rilke whose themes help to open up and further reveal the meaning of the research question. Significant research studies in the field of computer-mediated distance education that bear on the research question are explored in Chapter Two and help to document the importance of the question and illuminate aspects that call for further exploration.

Chapter Three examines the philosophical roots that support this research study and ground the hermeneutic phenomenological method of van Manen (2003) that guides this investigation. The design of the investigation is described.

Chapters Four and Five present the themes that emerge from the lived experience of the research community as we ponder in digitized text the meaning of the phenomenon: *What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?*

The themes in Chapter Four reflect the ways that this research community of distance learners and educators experience the lifeworld. We explore how we became present to one another in text, but especially in the unique identity of a learning community that contemplates the face of Christ. We became present to one another because we seek the face of God.

Chapter Five addresses the uniqueness of seeking and contemplating Christ in a computer-mediated learning community. Our research community describes the search for God as a dance of presence and absence, not only in the presence of our dancing fingers on computer keys, but in the ways that absence in our own lives has brought us to the presence of a community where we discover “the thrill of Christ” in the text of our online faces. Chapter Five explores the dimensions of transcendent presence in faith, in ritual, in theological study, and in friendship. The face of Christ becomes more and more visible in the text of our unique community.

Chapter Six attends to the educational insights of the research study and their implications for the field of distance education. Significant educational perspectives within the themes are addressed, such as the relationship to technology, to asynchronous time, to text, and to faculty and learners in the educational transaction that I call presence in distance. Areas for further research are proposed, and finally, as I reflect on my own transformation as researcher and religious educator, I ask what other journeys call to me in my new identity as a distance education researcher? As a learner who is now a teacher of presence in distance? How do I become the face of Christ for others in the text of my presence?

These are the swelling and ebbing currents, the deepening tides moving out and returning of Rilke's (1905/1996) *Love Poem to God* that call to me. The Net of the third millennium lures me to put out into the deep of the mystery of presence in distance. As the Church seeks new, more profound ways to make Christ present in a world that increasingly clings to the truth of physical presence, a global network of linked computer screens radiates a light that beckons toward channels that lead me into an open sea. A laptop computer is my new suitcase.

CHAPTER TWO:
**PRESENCE IN DISTANCE: EXPLORING THE PHENOMENON OF PRESENCE IN
THE ONLINE LEARNING COMMUNITY**

My laptop computer rests in a portable leather case attached to my body with a shoulder strap. Its size and carrying case enable it to become a suitcase for me, holding more and more of the important pieces of my life—work, study, communication, photos, journal, and research—accompanying me to the places where my life is lived—home and office. Even when I travel, my laptop accompanies me and furnishes my hotel room with the presence of home. In what way, I wonder, has my laptop computer become a home to me? Casey (1993) reflects on differences between house and home: “Homes, then, are not physical locations but situations for living” (p. 300). In what way has my laptop computer situated my living as a repository of information that brings comfort and identity to me and, as a suitcase, becomes a gateway to new worlds?

I have always liked suitcases. A suitcase frees me to travel yet holds what is familiar, like home. As an adult learner, like the graduate students at The Catholic Distance University (CDU), I wonder, “What is the lived experience of attending graduate school through the suitcase of a laptop computer?” For the graduate students at CDU, driven by a desire to encounter the face of Christ, what is the essence of a digital journey in the comfort of home? What is the essence of technology as a gateway to a disembodied place called cyberspace? In what way does technology become a gateway to a new world of community...of presence in distance?

Presence in Technology

Dr. Sherry Turkle (1984), in her sociological study of the impact of computers on the human spirit, acknowledged the uniqueness of the computer, which she called the machine that thinks: “Computers call up strong feelings, even for those who are not in

direct contact with them. People sense the presence of something new and exciting. But they fear the machine as powerful and threatening” (p. 13). She and others, like myself, wonder about the power of networked computers to make human presence present and enable human bonds of community to form in search of God through a computer screen: “The question is not what will the computer be like in the future, but instead, what will we be like?” (Turkle, p. 13).

The Self in Technology

Sister Timothy Prokes (2004), expressed a similar concern about the impact of computers on faith when she quotes Katherine Hayles: “While humans build computers, they are being molded by them” (p. 103). For the online graduate student, what is it like to be in class and be at home at the same time? What is it like to be present in class by subjecting one’s freedom to the laws of a machine; or to be a member of a learning community whose life depends on a connection to the Internet? What is the self within technology? What is the essence of the body to a computer-mediated learner, technologically present, and physically absent? In what way does technology reveal both presence and absence?

Turkle (1984) reflected the same wonder as she questions the impact of computer-mediated technology on us:

Technology catalyzes changes not only in what we do but in how we think. It changes people’s awareness of themselves, of one another, of their relationship with the world. The new machine that stands behind the flashing digital signal, unlike the clock, the telescope, or the train, is a machine that “thinks.” It challenges our notions not only of time and distance, but also of mind. (p. 13)

She described the frequency of encountering students who view themselves as computers: “...the idea of thinking of the self as a set of computer programs is widespread among students I interviewed at MIT and Harvard who were familiar with large computer systems” (p. 289). Sadly the complexity of computer systems becomes a

mirror of the self. She quotes an MIT honors student who tells her in an interview: "You have to stop talking about your mind as though it were thinking. It's not. It's just doing" (p. 288). This same student describes a childhood without playmates and most of his free time given to the role of Dungeon Master in the elaborate virtual reality game of *Dungeons and Dragons*. John Paul II (2002) spoke prophetically about the dangers that lurk in the new technology of the Net: "The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity" (*Message for 36th World Communications Day*, par. 4).

The Body and the Computer: A Two-edged Sword

In *The Absent Body*, Drew Leder, (1990), a philosopher and medical doctor, clarified our bodily relationship to tools, especially automated machines like the computer. He disputed the claim that the body becomes a machine, as Turkle and Prokes suggest. Leder, crediting philosopher Gabriel Marcel, points out that if the body were a machine, it would necessarily then require a more elemental source of control: "If our body were itself a tool, there would need to be a second more primordial body that uses it" (p. 179). Leder argues for the unity of mind and body as revealed phenomenologically in lived experience: "It is not that the body is like a tool, but that the tool is like a second sort of body, incorporated into and extending our corporeal powers" (p. 179). Leder believes that the two-edged sword of technology is its reduction of direct experience with the world. He gave the example of the telephone that is an instrument of human encounter devoid of smell, touch, and sight. What are the implications for a learning community formed by computer-mediated communication devoid of sound, touch, smell, and sight? Who we become through text is a question that causes me to wonder. Leder comments: "Our relationship unfolds in the space

created by our technologically supplemented bodies, not merely that of our natural flesh" (p. 32).

Poet Rainer Maria Rilke (1905/1996) writes about the importance of our link to God as reflected in the metaphor of gravity holding all of nature, including us, in place. When we try to live outside the laws of God and nature, we become self-destructive:

How surely gravity's law,
Strong as an ocean current,
Takes hold of even the smallest thing
And pulls it toward the heart of the world.

Each thing—
Each stone, blossom, child—
Is held in place.
Only we, in our arrogance,
Push out beyond what we each belong to
For some empty freedom.

If we surrendered
To earth's intelligence
We could rise up rooted, like trees.

Instead we entangle ourselves
In knots of our own making
And struggle, lonely and confused. (p. 116)

The technologically mediated virtual world of Turkle's students at MIT reflects Leder's warning about the dangers of living too much removed from the lived experience of the world and human community. In Rilke's poem, the entangled knots become an entrapment that leads to isolation from others...the opposite of longing to belong, the lure of connection and community. Rilke chose the simplicity of childhood as a simile for the importance of remaining connected to the real world. Gravity is seen as the pull of God that keeps us in place, rooted in Him, rather than a force that holds us back:

So, like children, we begin again
To learn from the things,

Because they are in God's heart;
They have never left him. (Rilke, pp. 116-117)

In the lure of the online community, how do we reach out to others through technology without becoming entrapped, losing our vital connection to the real world, to one another, and to God:

This is what the things can teach us:
To fall,
Patiently to trust our heaviness.
Even a bird has to do that
Before he can fly. (Rilke, p. 117)

In what way, I wonder, is our "heaviness" the assurance that lived experience keeps us linked to one another in place and presence?

Leder (1990) describes modern technology as a form of concealment. He gives the example of central heat as compared to a fireplace. Although the central heat is more convenient and efficient, it reduces the richness of bodily engagement with the world: the rhythm of seasons, the smell of wood smoke, the duty of work to cut and stack wood, the warmth of a hearth. He describes technology as "...this disappearance of the body and automaton alike that bring about a sort of world-disappearance, a reduction of certain possibilities of encounter" (p. 181). John Paul II (2002) warns that "electronically mediated relationships can never take the place of the direct human contact required for genuine evangelization. Evangelization always depends upon the personal witness of the one sent to evangelize" (*World Communications Day Message*, par. 5). He asked, "How does the Church lead from the kind of contact made possible by the Internet to the deeper communication demanded by Christian proclamation?" (par. 5).

Technology as Text

"Who are we online?" I ask. We are text. We become present to one another through text. Gadamer (1960/1999) comments, "...it is universally true of texts that only

in the process of understanding them is the dead trace of meaning transformed back into living meaning” (p. 164). What is the essence of text as presence? Who are we in the technology of text? Gadamer asks if “...being understood belongs to the meaning of a text, just as being heard belongs to the meaning of music?” (p. 164). Does the hermeneutical richness of online dialogue as literary text have the potential of increasing presence in the text-based community? Or do the limited social cues of text-based communication decrease the sense of presence in the online community? What does text reveal and what does it hide, I ask?

Walther’s (1996) empirical research on computer mediated, text-based groups suggests that they surpass similar face to face groups in levels of affection and emotion, both in recreational and business environments. He reports: “When participants are led to perceive that they are in a group relationship...This cognizance leads to attributions of greater similarity and liking with one’s partners. When social partners are not proximal, the salience of group membership becomes stronger yet” (p. 18). A CDU student, a double immigrant from Lithuania and Poland, writes about his faith journey across oceans, Marxism, and the influence of a Polish grandmother. Two other students come forward to share the influences of their Polish grandmothers. One of them writes, “By writing my story, I wanted to open my heart to the people who together with me are trying to know and love God.”

Walther (1996) is a communications researcher who proposed that asynchronous communication may enhance cognitive activity and social interaction. He concluded, “Asynchronous interaction may thus have the capacity to be more socially desirable and effective as composers are able to concentrate on message construction...at their own pace” (p. 26). A CDU student responds, “If I were in a classroom, the information would evaporate and be lost as it was spoken; here [in the online community] I have the advantage of the permanency of the written word...” Another student explains that opportunities to express deeper thought among students and faculty build community:

“We are present to each other as we thoughtfully and respectfully process the responses of each student and respond personally by name...the informal chatting about our personal lives, our interests, and involvements” (personal communication).

Meeting Anxiety in Technology

I, too, am an adult learner who has chosen distance in education. I acknowledge when I enroll in an online course that I am wholly dependent on technology; my freedom is limited by the laws of a machine. The course introduction begins with technical specifications of hardware and software that will enable the course to unfold, the content to be revealed, and the instructor and students, including myself, to be present to one another.

My relationship to technology creates anxiety. To begin an online course is to confront anxiety. Perhaps all education begins with some degree of anxiety because I confront the unknown, but in computer-mediated distance education, I wrestle first with technology, as the gatekeeper of the knowledge I yearn to grasp. My age is against me with technology. Will I keep up with my younger classmates in navigating the software? Is my tenuous connection to the Internet a reflection of my tenuous comfort in technology? Will my telephone connection disconnect in the middle of a sentence? Will I understand the language of the tutorial meant to teach me how to manipulate the software? Will I post my first assignment in the right place? Will savvy classmates sitting comfortably at home chuckle at my technical errors? Will my presence reveal my awkwardness?

Conrad (2002b) researched the phenomenon of learner anxiety in an empirical study of learners' experiences of starting their first online course. She concluded that early access to the course site reduces anxiety; according to a student survey, opportunities to investigate the course content, deadlines, and requirements early before the class starts, reduces anxiety.

A survey, however, only reports answers as choices composed ahead of time by the empirical researcher who also composes the questions. As a researcher of lived experience, I wonder about the silence of the words of the learners who begin an online course for the first time that have not yet been captured on a survey. Who will seek after those missing words and interpret them?

Conrad (2002b) reports that at the beginning of an online course, instructor interaction is less important than interaction with content. She tells us: "In the context of getting started in online courses, data from this study indicate that the learner-content interaction is by far the most important for helping learners feel initial engagement with the course" (p. 218). Conrad also noted that, like my own experience, students re-experience anxiety with each online course: "The results of the current study indicate that learners re-experience strong degrees of anxiety when beginning subsequent online courses" (p. 220). In what way, I wonder, does anxiety become presence in an online community?

As an online student for the first time, Mann (2003), a professor at the University of Glasgow, described the paradox of thinking she will feel greater freedom online than face to face, but because of the permanence of the transcription of all online conversation, she experiences more intimidation online than in a face to face class: "One becomes visibly inscribed in the text. I was conscious of asking myself: How much do I disclose? How anonymous do I remain?" (p. 115).

I recall emailing a final paper in my first online graduate course to an adjunct professor in New Zealand. He promised a quick email turnaround to acknowledge receipt of each paper. After re-sending the paper twice and calling the Help Desk of my university, I finally received the email acknowledgement a week late. The email system at the university in New Zealand was "down" for several days. I sensed failure and helplessness at the hands of technology.

Technology as Interface

As evidence of the significance of technology for online learners, Hillman, Willis, and Gunawardena (1994) proposed a fourth type of interaction that occurs among learners in an online course, which they call learner-interface interaction. This fourth type of interaction extends Moore's (1989) concept of interaction as occurring in three ways: between learner and content, instructor and learner, and learner to learner. Learner-interface interaction acknowledges the uniqueness of online learning that begins for both the learner and the instructor with the need to learn how to manipulate a computer. Turkle (1984) calls the computer "Janus-like" (p. 170). Tools, she explains, are extensions of their users, but machines "impose their own rhythm, their rules, on the people who work with them, to the point where it is no longer clear who or what is being used" (p. 170). Hillman et al. (1994) described the computer interface for online students as "an independent force with which the learner must contend" (p. 35). Recommendations from their research on learner-interface interaction center on providing more than a one-day orientation to technology. The ideal is a one-credit course taken prior to any technologically based distance education course. Other skills to be taught to distance students include using the Internet for research, implementing online research strategies, preparing graphics to enhance presentations, and introducing cognitive learning strategies in computer-mediated distance education.

The Language of Technology

Turkle (1984) warned of the danger of thinking of the computer as a metaphor for the person. We describe ourselves using the language of the computer. The implication of this, she suggests, is that we think of ourselves as machines: "Computer jargon carries an implicit psychology that equates the processes that take place in people to those that take place in machines. It suggests that we are information

systems..." (p. 17). For example, "Can we speak offline?" means speaking privately apart from the group.

Humor frequently surrounds the language of computers because we become oblivious to the ways it contradicts our daily lexicon. For example, in a fictitious Abbot and Costello dialogue, Abbot, the owner of a computer store, responds to Costello's question about buying a computer: "Do you want a computer with Windows?" "I don't know" Costello responds. "What will I see when I look at the windows?" Abbot responds, "Wallpaper." Later, after purchasing the computer, Costello calls Abbot back: "How do I turn my computer off? Abbot responds: "Click on 'START!'"

Van Manen (2003) has reminded human science researchers that the phenomenological method requires that we investigate experience as we live it, not as we conceptualize it. Gadamer (1960/1999) believes that the human sciences "seek not to surpass but to understand the variety of experiences—whether of aesthetic, historical, religious, or political consciousness—but that means they expect to find truth in them" (p. 99). Like the language of art for Gadamer, which is an "encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event," (p. 99), the textual presence of the online community in search of the face of Christ is an encounter that calls to me for understanding. As one who reaches out to this community through my own presence in text, I too expect to be changed.

Presence in Distance

Who are adult learners who join an online learning community rather than a traditional class? Why do they forego the traditional classroom for a computer screen...or settle for text rather than the fullness of embodied interaction with a professor and other adult learners? Why choose dialogue as text, rather than speech? Permanence for immediacy? A screen for a face? What are the circumstances of life that lead each online learner to cross the threshold of the new Net? Are there patterns of

personality, circumstances, background, life goals, or spiritual journeys that bring these particular people together through text on a computer screen that alters time and alters them?

The Search for Presence in Distance

I always begin an online class with a legal pad. I make a list of the names of the students in the class, leaving space between each name to jot down details I glean from their written introductions, to help begin to formulate the presence of each unique person in the class. Invariably there are two or more Jennys, Debbies, Katies, Toms, and Bobs; I take note of where they live and what kind of professional work they do, searching for distinctions that differentiate identities within text.

The task is easier at CDU because we download photos, meet in the online chapel, and chat in the café. The Dean of Students strolls the virtual halls on a daily basis, in addition to the faculty-student interaction in the online classes. Presence becomes a passion in CDU's cyberspace campus. What is missing or hidden from the senses of sight, hearing, smell, and touch, is made up for in the imagination fed by the hermeneutical richness of text. I study language patterns and embody classmates with my imagination linked to their text...vocabulary, writing style, humor, time, speed, and length of posts, kind remarks, gratitude for others...I sense that sometimes I squeeze out more presence than what might actually be there, projecting my own vivid imagination and a hunger to engage the presence of others...to coax...to flesh out the sparse outlines of electronically generated alphabetical markings that hide each person's life story.

Defining Presence in Distance

A growing number of empirical studies in computer-mediated distance education try to measure the meaning of presence in distance (Garrison, Anderson, &

Archer, 2003; Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Gunawardena & Zittle, 1997; Henri, 1992; Shin, 2002, 2003; Tu & McIsaac, 2002). Presence is defined by roles and relationships in the online classroom—social presence, teaching presence, cognitive presence, and transactional presence. The ability through linked computers for learners to interact with each other online, as well as with teachers and content, leads to questions about how interaction influences presence in distance and how presence influences learning. What is presence in distance? What is present and what is absent in technologically mediated presence?

The word *presence* originates from the French, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971, p. 1300). It means the fact or condition of being present; the state of being before, in front of, or in the same place with a person or thing; being there; attendance, company, society, association. Other meanings include a vague sense of the place or space in front of a person or which immediately surrounds him; ceremonial attendance upon a person of superior rank; a person who is corporally present usually with the implication of impressive appearance or bearing. Demeanor, nobleness, carriage, majesty or handsomeness of bearing or appearance; lastly, something present, a present being; a divine, spiritual or incorporeal being or influence felt or conceived as present. Presence also refers to the manner in which Christ is held to be present in the Eucharist.

The etymology of *presence* refers to bodily or corporeal presence, as well as openness to a divine, spiritual or incorporeal being or influence. It also suggests the notion of community because presence involves reciprocity, as it requires another person to acknowledge my presence to me, and I become the other who confirms the presence in distance for others. If the meaning of presence is corporeal, then is presence in the online community really present, I wonder? Yet, learners in the online community at CDU describe themselves as being present to one another. A graduate student from Arizona reflects on presence in the online community at CDU:

We are present to each other, and this includes the instructor, as we thoughtfully and respectfully process the responses of each student...We are present through our informal chatting in the Café about our personal lives, our interests, and our involvements—especially the opportunity to post photos. For example, I feel that I know Dr. Cirbee, [Dean of Students], even though I have never met her, partly because of her friendly and supportive involvement in the postings, and partly because I have a picture of her in my head! And I just realized that the online chapel contributes to the feeling of being present in a community because we have the opportunity to pray for each other, truly a connection on the most important level of all.

Spiritual Presence in Distance

Online presence at CDU is a richer phenomenon because of the added dimension of spiritual presence. Spiritual presence can be described but not quantified. It hides within the text that projects each identity and becomes visible only to those who have already experienced it outside the online community. In the online learning community at CDU, the search for truth assumes the reality of spiritual presence. Truth, according to Pope Benedict XVI, must be an encounter between reason and faith. “By asking the question about the truth, we are in fact broadening the horizon of our rationality, we are beginning to free reason from those excessively narrow boundaries that confine it when we consider as rational only what can be the object of experimentation or calculation” (2006a, p. 387).

Thomas Merton (1976) writes about the power of the presence of God he experiences as he is drawn to the religious art in the churches of Rome, which led to his own conversion:

But above all, the realist and most immediate source of this grace was Christ himself, present in those churches, in all his power, and in his humanity, in his human flesh and his material, physical, corporeal Presence...And it was he who was teaching me who he was, more directly than I was capable of realizing. (pp. 109-110)

His description uncovers the Catholic belief in the real presence of Christ in the Eucharist. Merton describes the effect of these visits, which he recognizes as an encounter with God himself: "And thus without knowing anything about it I became a pilgrim. I was unconsciously and unintentionally visiting all the great shrines of Rome, and seeking out their sanctuaries..." (p. 108). Spiritual presence in the online community is the recognition of the presence of God in each member of the community. Pope Benedict (2006a) confirms this: "Do not overlook any of life's dimensions because Christ has come to save the whole of the person, in the intimacy of consciences as well as in the expressions of culture and social relations" (p. 389). In what way does spiritual presence contribute to the experience of adult faith formation in the online learning community in search of the face of Christ? How is spiritual presence enriched or diminished through text?

Emily Dickinson (1896/1961) writes about the hidden reality of faith in God as a visual presence in distance. She reveals the power of presence in distance as a journey through the mind and heart that becomes a source of wisdom, far exceeding the bounds of her sheltered personal life. From 1855 until her death in 1886, according to biographers, she only left her home in Amherst, Massachusetts twice to consult doctors in Boston about her eyes. Many of her poems acknowledge the hidden presence of God:

I never saw a Moor—
I never saw the Sea—
Yet know I how the Heather looks
And what a Billow be.

I never spoke with God
Nor visited in Heaven—
Yet certain am I of the spot
As if the Checks were given— (1890, p. 236)

She develops a similar theme of presence in distance in loved ones who die:

The distance that the dead have gone

Does not at first appear —
Their coming back seems possible
For many an ardent year.

And then, that we have followed them,
We more than half suspect,
So intimate have we become
With their dear retrospect. (1896, p. 318)

In another poem she contrasts the power of the brain to the limitations of the physical world. She likens the brain to God, ironically noting that, as two incorporeal substances, they weigh the same; she contrasts the richness of the incorporeal to corporeal reality — presence in distance:

The Brain—is wider than the Sky—
For—put them side by side—
The one the other will contain
With ease—and You—beside—

The Brain is deeper than the sea—
For—hold them—Blue to Blue—
The one the other will absorb—
As Sponges—Buckets—do—

The Brain is just the weight of God—
For—Heft them—Pound for Pound—
And they will differ—if they do—
As Syllable from Sound— (1896, p. 161)

Dickinson celebrates the power of the imagination to make life present through language; she acknowledges that both nature and the imagination can make a prairie, but only the human imagination can make a prairie without requiring “the clover and a bee”:

To make a prairie it takes a clover and one bee,
One clover, and a bee,
And reverie.
The reverie alone will do,

If bees are few. (1896, p. 319)

For Dickinson the natural world becomes a metaphor for the world of thought and language; her inner world reveals a richer presence than even the beauty and fertility of the natural world encountered through bodily presence. For her, the lived experience of natural beauty becomes a springboard for the mind and heart that dwell in unbounded presence.

Presence as Social, Cognitive, Teaching, and Transactional

Empirical studies of computer-mediated learning reveal a growing awareness of the concept of presence. Tu and McIsaac (2002) report, in their mixed method research on social presence, the ability of learners to project themselves socially and emotionally as real people. The researchers' qualitative measures reveal more variables— familiarity with recipients, informal relationships, better trust relationships, a positive psychological attitude toward technology, and more private locations to access an online course—that contribute to social presence, than their quantitative study proposes. More recent empirical studies have identified other influential forms of presence in the online classroom: cognitive presence defined as “the extent to which learners are able to construct and confirm meaning through sustained reflection and discourse in a critical community of inquiry” (Garrison, Anderson, & Archer, 2003, p. 115), and teaching presence defined as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (p. 115-116).

Tu and McIsaac (2002) refer to social presence as “the most important perception that occurs in an environment and fundamental to person-to-person communication” (p. 131). In the online community, they define social presence as “the measure of the feeling of community that a learner experiences” (p. 131), and recommend a dedicated

time for introductions be integrated into course design in an online course. Other factors that strengthen social presence are informal relationships, development of trust, personally informative relationships, a positive psychological attitude toward technology, and the ability to access technology from home rather than from a public site. Increased interactivity that contributes to a stronger social presence includes a timely response to messages, stylistic communication styles, casual conversations, appropriate message length, and choice in learning tasks that includes planning, creativity, intellectual, cognitive, and decision making tasks. Group size becomes more significant if interaction is synchronous, rather than asynchronous. Tu and McIsaac admit that much was learned from the qualitative methods they employed, which included in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis. Most of the variables they identified that affect social presence involve relationships and attitudes. Quantitative research techniques do not measure well the subtle complexities of human relationships and attitudes. What is the meaning of presence in text? In what ways does technology reveal or conceal human presence? These questions need to be addressed by descriptive research methodologies.

Shin's (2003) quantitative research on transactional presence as a predictor of success in computer-mediated distance education is predicated on the theory that a psychological relationship influences the student's sense of presence and influences learning outcomes: the presence of the teacher, other students, and the institution. Shin defines transactional presence as, "the degree to which a distance education student senses psychologically the availability of and connectedness with teachers, peer students, and the educational institution" (p. 69). Shin substantiates the importance of relationship, not just interactivity that she defines as an activity. Relationship contributes to persistence, learner satisfaction, and improved learning outcomes. She reports a positive link between peer-to-peer presence and student satisfaction, as well as intent to persist. Her survey analysis reveals that a learner's awareness of institutional

presence impacts all the measures of success in distance learning, while teaching presence contributes most significantly to improved learning outcomes.

A Method of Presence

While quantitative measures reveal trends, the richness of descriptive methodologies like hermeneutical phenomenology used by van Manen (2003) in educational contexts, reveals the subtleties within human relationships and forces the researcher to remain mindful of the original question. Gadamer (1960/1999) emphasizes the importance of the question in hermeneutical experience: "...there is a profound recognition of the priority of the question in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object. Discourse that is intended to reveal something that requires that the thing be broken open by the question" (p. 363). What is the lived experience of presence in distance, I ask, in adult faith formation in an online learning community?

As a researcher of presence in distance, I am drawn to Shin's (2003) theory of presence as a relational construct that reveals the power of psychological bonds. Quantitative measures suggest that relationships established between presence and distance do affect persistence, learning outcomes, and satisfaction. Yet, as a phenomenologist, I find it quite impossible to measure "perceptions of psychological presence" (p. 69) through quantitative measures alone. Shin's recommendations for further research reinforce the need for descriptive methodologies:

It would be desirable for further research to take an in-depth, micro-level approach to reveal what notions of presence distance students hold with respect to each party. Furthermore, researchers interested in individual differences may wish to investigate the elements of individual student characteristics contributing to varying degrees of perceived transactional presence, though involved in similar distance education systems. (p. 82)

A hermeneutical phenomenological method is ideally suited to an in-depth, micro-level study of presence in distance that reaches individual differences among learners.

A Framework of Community

Garrison, Anderson, and Archer (2003) use a community of inquiry framework for their research on presence. Their findings are graphically represented by three intersecting circles of social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence. In a more recent research study, Garrison and Cleveland-Innes (2005) stress the importance of a strong teaching presence that may be carried out by an instructor and/or other students in the class, to move from social to cognitive presence. Pawan, Paulus, Yalcin, and Chang (2003) note, "Without instructor's explicit guidance and teaching presence, students were found to engage primarily in serial monologues" (p. 143). Garrison and Cleveland-Innes clarify the type of teaching presence needed: "Sustained teaching presence that encourages participation but is not teacher centered, is crucial" (p. 145). Shin (2003) also links teaching presence to improved learning outcomes. In what way does teaching presence contribute to the contemplation of the face of Christ in the online community? What are the dimensions of teaching presence, and who assumes this role?

Presence and the Self of the Researcher

Mann (2003), a faculty member at the University of Glasgow, who uses personal inquiry as a research method, examines her own experiences in self-presentation and community formation through written text in an online learning community. She, too, makes recommendations based on her research concerning presence. This method, based on critical reflection, comes closer to phenomenological methods, as she is both researcher and the subject of her own research.

Mann (2003) enrolls in her first online course and keeps a diary to record her impressions, feelings, and experiences. Her inability to feel present is, in her words, a

failure. She describes “a failure of community,” because she does not become a part of the learning community according to her own record of lived experience. She describes anxiety in not knowing who the other members of the community are and their backgrounds. She senses different values from hers, and she describes managing her identity as more complicated and exaggerated:

It seems to me that these anxieties were exaggerated online rather than mitigated. The factors that seem to be at play here for me are to do with the invisibility of one’s peers and teacher; the lack of or limited amount of feedback and clues as to who they are and what they are making of me; the loss of speed, and concomitant increase in effort required to communicate in writing; and my sense of clumsiness and illiteracy in this new medium. (p. 116)

Her recommendations for course design and facilitation echo other empirical findings that stress the importance of using conscious techniques to enhance presence online: (a) Consciously facilitate through course design the presentation of learner and teacher identities at the beginning of an online course; (b) Guide discussion with explicit operating norms and conventions; (c) Use alternative forms of indexical signs and contextual cues to support and lighten the burden of the weight of words; (d) Train faculty to be mindful of the potential for misunderstanding; (e) Teach first time users to learn new literacy practices; (f) Consciously incorporate ways the online learning community can be open to the “other” of uncertainty, ambiguity, and difference within the boundaries of the learning space (pp. 121-122). Mann’s personal assessment of failure to feel part of the online community reflects an educational failure to set boundaries that should be provided through careful course design, teaching or facilitator presence, and structural norms to compensate for the limitations of presence through written text. Mann describes this as the “weight of words”:

First meetings, early presentations of self, negotiations of learning community norms, and responses to contributors all have the potential for greater misunderstanding; all therefore become more significant and require greater effort to manage. No wonder then, that the weight of the words is felt so keenly.

A whole new communication process has to be learned. It is not simply a process of shifting from speaking and listening to reading and writing. (p. 119)

Mann (2003) suggests the importance of recognizing the demands of technology in the online learning community. Although educators talk about distance education merely as a “delivery system,” each online learner interacts first with technology before interacting with content, the instructor, the student support system, and informal areas of social discussion.

Presence as Interface

Sister Timothy Prokes, FSE, (2004) is a Catholic theologian who raises concerns about the loss of *presence* as “actual, personal relational being-there” (p. 58). She attributes this loss to the growing influence of virtual reality; ironically, however, she encourages adopting the term *interface* in speaking about theology: “While the term *interface* designates a fluid boundary point for virtual reality, it also indicates a growing human hunger to exceed ordinary experience of limited presence” (p. 59). She links our human desire to overcome boundaries as “a longing that erupts from the depths of the human person” (p. 71).

Is the online community expressing the human desire to overcome boundaries? In what way does the online community formed by linked computers reflect the longing to belong? What are the boundaries overcome by the online community formed by a desire to contemplate the face of Christ? Sister Prokes (2004) reminds us, as Emily Dickinson does through her poetry, that the longing to belong will only be partially fulfilled even through embodied reality; presence and absence are traits associated with the limitations of bodily reality. Sister Prokes warns, “To touch any one of these traits is to touch human personhood and human relationship to Divine Persons” (p. 70). Are there ways that presence is enhanced through distance? What is revealed in distance

that may not be revealed in physical presence? How does technology disclose presence and conceal it?

The Depth of Presence

The philosopher John O'Donohue (1999) suggests that human presence may come through the body, but reveals a deeper reality of the human person:

Presence is the whole atmosphere of a person or thing. Presence is more than the way a person walks, looks, or speaks. It is more than the shape of a tree or the color of a stone, yet it is a blend of all these aspects. Presence is mainly the atmosphere of spirit that is behind them all and comes through them. (p. 53)

What are the dimensions of human presence in the virtual world of the online community? What are the forms of presence that present themselves online and draw us into the online community without the presence of the human body? What does a CDU student mean when she writes: "Just as we are in communion with the angels and the saints at prayer, so too, in the online community we are present to each other. We cannot see each other, but I know that my fellow students are praying for me and with me. The opportunity to share ideas and conversation online provides a virtual social and academic connection between students and faculty" (personal communication, 2006).

O'Donohue (1999) finds the concept of human presence to be central to understanding our longing to belong. He writes, "Presence to each other is the door to all belonging" (p. 60). According to O'Donohue, belonging originates in our body: "All belonging is an extension of the first and closest belonging of living in one's own body. The body is a home, which shelters you. All other forms of belonging continue this first belonging" (p. 72). He quotes Merleau-Ponty (1972), "My body is the awareness of the gaze of the other" (p. 60). What is the significance, I wonder, when I hide my body?

The Richness of Presence in Absence

If presence originates in the body, as O'Donohue (1999) proposes, then how are the members of an online community present to one another? The answer to that question may be suggested in O'Donohue's insights about imagination:

The human imagination loves suggestion rather than exhaustive description of a thing. Often, for instance, one dimension of a thing can suggest the whole presence that is not there or available now...Imagination strives to create real presence...Presence is longing reaching at once outwards and inwards. (p. 58)

As Walther's research (1996) has suggested, the limited social cues of text-based, computer-mediated communication may actually possess qualities of self-presentation that compensate for bodily absence that may depend more on the imagination to help enhance and complete the presence of others in positive ways. Walther references a study comparing perception of partners in face-to-face, video conferencing, and audio conferencing. He concludes: "In the only condition in which they could not see each other, participants thought their partners were more physically attractive" (p. 21).

In a study of feelings of presence among computer users in virtual environments, Jelfs and Whitelock (2000) find through interviews that audio feedback is considered as one of the most important features that engenders a sense of presence. Walther (1996) also reports that audio conferencing partners produce the highest ratings of partners' attitude similarity, social attractiveness, and physical attractiveness.

Emily Dickinson (1961) also suggests that tenderness actually slips away as we try to grasp it by proof. In a short poem written in 1864, she proposes that absence and death are a "hiding," not a negation of presence:

Absence disembodies—so does Death
Hiding individuals from the Earth
Superstition helps, as well as love—
Tenderness decreases as we prove— (p. 211)

In what way, I wonder, does the “hiding” in absence, the distance in presence, actually enrich presence through the imagination?

In the Gospel of John, Christ addresses the theme of presence and absence in a dialogue with the Apostle Thomas. Thomas is often referred to as the “Doubting Thomas” because he refuses to believe that Christ has risen from the dead without sensible proof. Christ tells him, “You have believed because you have seen me. Blessed are those who have not seen and yet believe” (*New Testament and the Psalms*, 2006, p. 224). What are the limitations of “seeing” that enrich the online community in search of the face of Christ?

Thomas Aquinas (1273/2003) testifies to the relationship between hidden “sight” and faith in a Latin poem, *Adoro Te Devote*, composed to honor the presence of Christ in the Eucharist, a belief among Catholics that Christ is substantially present bodily and spiritually in the consecrated host:

I devoutly adore you, O hidden God,
Truly hidden beneath these appearances...
Sight, touch, taste are all deceived
In their judgment of you...
On the Cross only the divinity was hidden,
But here the Humanity is also hidden.

I do not see the wounds as Thomas did,
But I confess that you are my God...

Jesus, whom now I see hidden... (2003, p. 2241)

Aquinas describes faith as “seeing,” a hidden reality of personal presence that in Christ is both human and divine. Dickinson (1896/1961) also witnesses to the reality of the divine and human presence of God in her life:

I live with Him—I see His face—
I go no more away
For Visitor—or Sundown—
Death’s single privacy

I live with Him—I hear His Voice
I stand alive—Today
To witness to the Certainty
Of immortality— (p. 111)

In what way, I wonder, does the phenomenon of presence and absence in the online community increase faith in the presence of Christ? How does the absence of presence in the online community contribute to the contemplation of the face of Christ?

Presence revealed through text alone may make unconcealment easier and contribute to greater intimacy in the online community. Some distance educators (Carabajal, LaPointe & Gunawardena, 2003; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Ross, 2006) highlight advantages of bodily absence in the online community that ease the acceptance of others. Online learners do not know physical differences of race, gender, age, qualities such as attractiveness or shyness, unless photos are shared or a learner chooses to reveal personality traits. In the online community there is the expectation of equality of participation. Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, and Turoff (1995) praise the computer-mediated learning community for its physical absences: “Text-based interactions focus on the meaning of the message rather than the physical cues such as race, gender, age, physical appearance, or dress of the sender, thereby reducing some of the discriminatory cues of face-to-face communication” (p. 32). To my knowledge, Mann (2003) is the only researcher as online learner herself who reports more anxiety about participation online than face-to-face.

A Catholic sociologist and dean at the Institute for the Psychological Sciences in Arlington Virginia, Dr. G. Alexander Ross (2006), is of the opinion that research into cyber relationships demonstrates deeper friendships when physical characteristics are not normally visible. He cites a laboratory experiment that found subjects who met for the first time online liked each other more than those who first met face-to-face. He believes that a high percentage of online friendships actually transfer from the Internet

to real life; online communication supplements and facilitates friendships. He is of the position that many online communities do exhibit the conventional characteristics of a common identity and sustained patterns of interaction: "Cyber communities as lower order associations do respond to the needs of others with spontaneity and closeness... There are many instances of groups which have used the Internet to mobilize others to respond with compassion to human and social problems" (*Christian charity in cyber communities*, July 12, 2006).

The limitations of text not only reduce our awareness of physical differences within a learning community, but the richness of imagination and the activity of the mind as revealed through text lead us inward. Emily Dickinson (1961) shares the vast expanse of her inner life using geographical metaphors to portray the depth and mystery of each person:

The Heart is the Capital of the Mind—
The Mind is a single State—
The Heart and the Mind together make
A single Continent—
One—is the Population—
Numerous enough—
This ecstatic Nation
Seek—it is Yourself. (1929/1961, p. 278)

Dickinson's metaphor is all the more powerful when one contrasts her inner world of poetic extravagance with such physical reclusivity of life in a small New England town. Her sheltered bodily experience feeds an ability to explore the vast world of the mind and imagination through the language of poetry.

Longing is at the core of the soul, O'Donohue (1999) believes. "It is the secret source of all presence, and the driving force of all creativity and imagination" (p. 73). Distance, rather than highlighting separation, according to O'Donohue, evokes longing: "Your longing reaches out into the distance to unite you with whatever or whomsoever your heart desires. Longing awakens when there is a feeling that someone or something

is away from you...Deep down, we desire to come back into the intimate unity of belonging" (p. 73). Dickinson (1961), too, writes about distance as something deeper than space or geography and becomes "beloved":

Distance—is not the Realm of Fox
Nor by Relay of Bird
Abated—Distance is
Until thyself, Beloved. (1914, p. 253)

In what way does distance in the online community encourage closeness? Does geographical distance enhance psychological closeness? What are the aspects of human presence made more visible without the body? Does letting go of bodily presence through technology make other kinds of presence, like spiritual presence, more present in the online community that contemplates the face of Christ?

The Presence of Solitude

Theologian Henri Nouwen (1975) believes that the spiritual life begins when we learn not to be afraid of loneliness. Loneliness must be transformed into solitude. In what way does loneliness accompany the online learning community? In what way does the online community enable loneliness to be transformed into solitude? Nouwen writes:

The movement from loneliness to solitude, however, is the beginning of any spiritual life because it is the movement from the restless senses to the restful spirit, from the outward-reaching cravings to the inward-reaching search, from the fearful clinging to the fearless play. (pp. 34-35)

Rilke (1905/1996) also distinguishes loneliness from the richness of solitude in his *Book of Hours*:

I'm too alone in the world, yet not alone enough
To make each hour holy.
I'm too small in the world, yet not small enough
To be simply in your presence, like a thing—

Just as it is.

I want to unfold.

Let no place in me hold itself closed,

For where I am closed, I am false.

I want to stay clear in your sight. (p. 59)

In what way does the solitude of the online community deepen the presence of God for those who contemplate the face of Christ, I wonder? John Paul II (2002) also highlights the need for solitude in the spiritual journey and worries about the Internet:

...Human beings have a vital need for time and inner quiet to ponder and examine life and its mysteries...the Internet, as a forum in which practically everything is acceptable and almost nothing is lasting, favours a relativistic way of thinking and sometimes feeds the flight from personal responsibility and commitment. (*World Communications Day Message*, par. 4)

In what way do the members of an online community in search of the face of Christ find solitude mediated through technology fleeting, I wonder? In what way is text-based dialogue solitude? Can loneliness become solitude online?

Presence as Place

What does being a learner at home contribute to the online community? What does physical comfort and privacy in the body's presence at home contribute to the disembodied online community? One of the strongest arguments that adult learners give for choosing distance in education is the freedom from bodily presence at a prescribed time in a prescribed place. In the face of gridlocked traffic, parking, and child-care costs, rising gasoline prices, wear and tear on automobiles, night driving, safety and security issues, missed meals, and sacrifice of family to attend classes at night, it is no surprise that more and more adults choose to log on to a computer network to attend class in the comfort of home—exchanging bodily presence for computer-mediated presence through electronically generated text—even with the

potential frustrations of subservience to technology. Does home make the space of cyberspace more of a place than space? In what way does the online community become a home?

The Presence of Home

Home (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971) is a Teutonic word that means dwelling or world. Its meaning includes both a place and a state of mind. "It is one's own house, as well as the household, the family, and the contents of a house. It may be a village or a town or a collection of dwellings; it may include the conditions, circumstances, and feelings associated with a dwelling" (p. 1322).

O'Donohue (1999) comments, "The shelter of home liberates creativity and spirituality...outside in the world you have to temper your longing and obey convention" (p. 71). Dickinson (1961) describes her preference for the home of the soul that welcomes the presence of Christ to the lure of the world:

The Soul that hath a Guest
Doth seldom go abroad—
Diviner Crowd at Home—
Obliterate the need—

And Courtesy forbid
A Host's departure when
Upon Himself be visiting
The Emperor of Men—(1914, p. 170)

She finds the company she prefers at home, whether home is her house in Amherst, Massachusetts, or the home of her thoughts, or her soul where she entertains the presence of God...whatever the richness of meaning in the word *home* for Dickinson, it is preferable to physical reality outside the home in the world.

Casey (1993) also talks about the place of home as "something more than a house" (p. 299) and something less than a house, as it need not be built. "Houses are

displaceable from their sites and subject to destruction...but homes are undetachable from the places to which they belong" (p. 300). According to Casey, a home can just be a hearth:

No wonder that the hearth can stand in for home, since it is the feature deepest within a house and a place we literally *inhabit*. From this focal center domestic energy radiates outward, exceeding the very house that is the material frame of the home. (p. 300)

"Any number of things can provide sufficient focus to serve as a hearth: a group of memorabilia, a coffee table, a television set, a stereo set... (a laptop computer, I wonder?)...to bear the weight of what I have called *localized caring*" (Casey, p. 299). The laptop computer may be home for me, but, like a suitcase, it is built to travel, not to be stationery as, according to Casey, "The home is a paradigmatic kind of end-place" (p. 300). The laptop computer is as much a door into other worlds, as it is a home for me.

Tu and McIsaac (2002) report in their qualitative findings on social presence in an online graduate course that location is significant: "The location from which students could access computers is a critical element" (p. 142). Location of computer access turns out to be a significant influence on feelings of privacy, although the study reports an insignificant correlation between social presence and privacy. On the other hand, Tu and McIsaac report that system privacy and a perception of privacy are major variables:

The location from which students could access computers is a critical element. Students accessing CMC at home had the conveniences of privacy, a more relaxed atmosphere, a strong familiarity with their own computers, and the ability to exert greater control and flexibility over their schedules. These advantages permit a greater willingness and a higher motivation to engage in CMC activities. (p. 142)

Although no link is established between social presence and privacy, the emergence of privacy as a major variable and the importance of "place" in creating a sense of privacy should be examined further to better understand not only its impact on motivation, but also its contribution to a sense of community in the online community

that seeks to contemplate the face of Christ. What is the experience of contemplating the face of Christ in public, such as in a public library, where computer use is timed and privacy is lacking? What is the role of place from where I seek to enter cyberspace? In what way does place contribute to contemplation? What does the place I call home contribute to my body's longing to belong?

Philosopher Gaston Bachelard (1958/1994) in *The Poetics of Space* writes about how perceptions of houses influence our thinking: "The house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace...I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories and dreams of mankind" (p. 6). I wonder if learners in the online community at CDU reflect on the influence of their home as the place where they become present to one another and to God?

Steven Jones (1995) reflects on the evolving meaning of *place* in the world of cyberspace in an introduction to a group of essays on the nature of community in computer-mediated communication. He describes computer-mediated communication as socially produced space. He believes that "information is itself understood as a physical entity: Cyberspace hasn't a 'where.' Rather, the space of cyberspace is predicated on knowledge and information, on the common beliefs and practices of a society abstracted from physical space" (p. 19). What is the essence of place for members of an online community who meet in virtual space and chat over virtual coffee? In what way does space become place when the community is formed to contemplate the face of Christ? How do a virtual chapel and a virtual café become a place marked by friendship and warmth, a "place to share insights and concerns, problems and solutions, enthusiasms, and fears? (Harasim et al., 1995, p. 32). What is the link between physical place and virtual space in the spiritual journey?

Patterns of Presence in Distance

Patterns emerge among the backgrounds of adult learners at CDU. In addition to the momentum of a spiritual journey and the desire for an academic credential, the limitations of time, family, and work responsibilities are the reasons they give for choosing computer-mediated presence in distance.

A mother of six who works professionally as a medical researcher comments, "I am not in a position to be in a classroom setting because of the size of my family, the ages of my children, family commitments, and work/volunteer obligations. The flexibility of online distance learning serves me well. I am free to access the class materials and discussions at any time of the day or night, so I can easily tailor my studies around my busy schedule." A pediatrician in Philadelphia responds, "There is no way with my demanding schedule that I could have run about here and there trying to earn another degree." A medical librarian in New Jersey adds, "I have a full-time job in the secular world, and do a huge amount of volunteer work...I wanted somewhere that did not have a huge on-campus, in-person requirement. This fulfills my wish to learn and not be encumbered by time schedules." For some it is ironically their geographical place that encourages them to let go of place for virtual space when their geography does not include the presence of a Catholic college or university in commuting distance; they seek a Catholic education and Catholic formation through technology. Are there other common bonds, I wonder, among adults who choose presence in distance, or are they reducible to practical necessities of time and space?

The Body as Place

Drew Leder (1990) in *The Absent Body* describes the presence-absence dynamic of the human body, its fluidity as continually present and absent to consciousness. "The lived body is thus first and foremost not a located thing but a path of access, a being-in-

the-world” (p. 21). Likewise, adult learners who belong to online learning communities do not live in cyberspace only. Virtual presence in the online community influences the cognitive, affective, and spiritual dimensions of each participant’s embodied presence. These disembodied experiences contribute to the bodily experiences of each participant lived out in the communities of which they physically belong, such as the family, the parish, the workplace and the community.

Consideration of the interaction of online presence and bodily presence is vital to adult faith formation. As John Paul II reminded the Church in 2002, the fullness of presence can never occur within the virtual presence of the Internet community: “The Internet can never replace that profound experience of God which only the living, liturgical, and sacramental life of the Church can offer” (*World Communications Day Message*, par. 3). The virtual community can supplement, support, and help prepare each believer for the encounter with Christ in community; in addition, as the online community at CDU strives to do, it can sustain the believer in his journey of faith. But, as a researcher of presence in distance, I wonder about the fluidity of online presence and its effect on bodily presence? In what ways does the online community enrich the local Christian community of each adult learner? In what way does the computer-mediated community make the face of Christ more visible to the embodied community to which each belongs? What is the lived experience of adult learners in the online community seeking to contemplate the face of Christ who “share the life of the Christian community, of which adults are members who both give and receive from the community”?

Presence in Community

Steven Jones (1995) emphasizes the need to understand more fully the implications of using computers to create community: “...much of our energy has been directed toward understanding the speed and volume with which computers can be

used as communication tools. Conspicuously absent is an understanding of how computers are used as tools for connection and community” (p. 12). Despite a span of twelve years since Jones’ analysis, research still has learned very little about the phenomenon of community created by networked computers. In what way does presence become community in the lived experience of the online learning community that seeks to contemplate the face of Christ? What are the contours of this community, and what are the differences from other communities that live in virtual space or actual place?

What Makes Community Christian?

Luke, the Evangelist, is the first to describe the contours of the Christian community through written language in the second chapter of the Acts of the Apostles (*New Testament and the Psalms*, 2006, p. 231). He describes a community that shares a common teaching, a common life, a common prayer, charity, and Holy Communion in the shared reception of the “Breaking of the Bread” in the Eucharist. In what way does the online learning community at CDU also share in the life of the earliest Christian community formed from the bodily presence of Jesus Christ? In what way is the online community, a real Christian community? In what way does the virtual community that seeks to contemplate the face of Christ also reflect the shared life, teaching, charity, prayer, and communion of the real Christian community? What are the limits of presence in distance in the formation of a Christian community? John Paul II (2002) asked, “From this galaxy of sight and sound [the Internet], will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard (*World Communications Day Message*, par. 6)?

Researching the lived experience of the virtual learning community is essential to understanding its place in authentic catechesis. Msgr. Francis Kelly (1993), a catechetical scholar, stresses the importance of the role of community in catechesis: “Community building must be a major goal of our catechetical efforts in the new millennium...We all

share the divine life, not only with Christ but with one another. This reality must become a lived experience” (p. 57). The American Bishops in 1972 use similar language to make the same point:

Community is at the heart of Christian education, not simply as a concept to be taught, but as a reality to be lived...As God’s plan unfolds in the life of a Christian, he grows in awareness that, as a child of God through Baptism, he becomes a member of a new and larger family, the Christian community. (*To teach as Jesus did*, par. 22-23)

The General Directory for Catechesis (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) states, “The Christian community is the origin, locus, and the goal of catechesis...the historical realization of the gift of communion...” (p. 235). The adult learners who form the online community at CDU do not exist solely as a virtual community independent of the Christian communities to which they belong. Each member of the online community belongs to a parish and a diocese. Many belong to other faith communities for prayer and service to the Church. Some members are ordained clergy, religious sisters and brothers, permanent deacons who become members of the online community for the length of a semester course, or for the length of a theology degree. The virtual community remains rooted in the embodied Church community.

A recent MA graduate finds that she is recruited to lead a faith formation program at her parish: “The pastor has said that he is more comfortable leaving it in my hands considering my MA in Theology, rather than with other members of the group,” she explains. The pediatrician in Philadelphia now writes articles on bioethical issues for medical journals since his graduation: “CDU gave me the opportunity to explore the non-empirical world of all that is unseen. Since taking a course in bioethics at CDU, I have become a member of the National Catholic Bioethics Society and submitted articles for publication.” The lived experience of membership in the virtual community of CDU inspires adult learners to find ways to make God present in their own embodied communities of family, Church, and work.

The General Directory of Catechesis (Congregation for the Clergy, 1997) also encourages the use of the media:

The media has become essential for evangelization and catechesis. In fact, the Church would feel herself guilty before God if she did not avail of those powerful instruments which human skill is constantly developing and perfecting...In them she finds in a new and more effective forum a platform or pulpit from which she can address the multitudes. (p. 153)

In a recent press release (March 5, 2007), Archbishop (now Cardinal) John Foley, Director of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications at the Vatican, warns that the Church is often seen more for its negativity towards communications media: “We who have the responsibility to proclaim the most important message in the history of the human race—have often lacked the imagination and the dedication to use the media well. We have also sometimes been guilty of...resorting more often to condemnation than to commendation in our use of the media” (*Let’s not be naysayers*, par. 3). The Archbishop proposes that media should be used to reflect the love, mercy, and compassion of Christ. In what ways are the love, mercy, and compassion of Christ reflected in the online learning community, I wonder?

The Meaning of Community

At the conclusion of her book on theology and virtual reality, Sister Timothy Prokes (2004) both inspires and alarms, perhaps reflecting her own turmoil with human community in a virtual world: “There is an insistent human longing for communion, the image of Trinitarian life, that is rising up within humanity at the present time, but is constantly in danger of being trapped in what is pseudo-fulfillment” (p. 168). Community, according to Sister Prokes, has a divine dimension and mirrors the Trinitarian reality of God. Christ reveals God’s inner nature as community in the revelation of the Trinity. In *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) the living out of community with the Trinitarian God is described as prayer: “Prayer is the living

relationship of the children of God with their Father, who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ, and with the Holy Spirit” (p. 615).

The Growth of Community

Dr. Thomas Esselman (2004) of Aquinas Institute of Theology, a Dominican sponsored school of theology and ministry in St. Louis, describes a Master of Arts program in pastoral theology developed for the Archdiocese of Oklahoma City that used web-based instruction to build community. The program combined web enhancements such as a course website, posted documents including a syllabus, bibliography, reading assignments, discussion questions, and a threaded discussion site with a resident cohort of learners envisioned as a wisdom community that met face to face with faculty. Esselman argues for incorporating distance education into the traditional model of ministry formation that aims at transforming the whole person. He writes, “Distance education not only helped the students to engage the course content but also collectively to grow in their identity as a wisdom community” (pp. 160-161). The model he proposes views wisdom as a dynamic process that unites heart and mind toward maturity in discipleship. This process, as in all catechesis, takes place in the context of community. According to Esselman, “Wisdom communities reflect the inherent nature of the church as *communio*” (p. 165).

Although in the Aquinas Institute model of distance education as supplemental to class meetings, the dynamic of relationships between faculty and students changes. For example, Esselman (2004) reports that “Students were encouraged to converse with each other and not simply with or through the professor, as is so often the case in the residential classroom” (p. 167). Another benefit of threaded online discussion, according to Esselman, is the tendency to “raise questions or initiate lines of thought not originally anticipated by the instructor or other members of the group” (p. 167). This reflects the equality of the online community where both adult learners and faculty

assume the responsibilities of teaching presence. His findings suggest that “the Web opens up new possibilities for learning through interactivity, access to diverse worldviews, and virtual space where communities of practice can meet” (p. 169). Web-based teaching offers insights that can actually enhance the traditional classroom experience. Esselman concludes that instructional technology for ministry “...is in fact not only a possibility but also an opportunity of real promise for the future of the Church” (p. 169).

Two other examples support Esselman’s (2004) findings that web-based enhancements do support the construction and growth of learning communities. In 1991, the Rand Corporation studied employees who incorporate messaging on an electronic network in addition to meetings and telephone contact. The results show that not only do employees work more closely together, but a year after the experiment ended, the electronic group still communicates; in addition, a social support network for retirees grew out of the original network (Shaffer & Anundsen, 2005).

Harasim et al. (1995) described the lack of bonding among graduate students who work fulltime and attend classes at night at the New Jersey Institute of Technology. In spite of face-to-face interaction in classes for most of the students in the program, the online students form much stronger bonds: “The online learning community that had formed on the network had been more lasting for the students than bonds formed through traditional classes” (p. 33).

Canadian researcher Dianne Conrad (2002a) used qualitative research strategies to chronicle the development of community in an online undergraduate program for adult learners. She uses in-depth interviews and field notes in a reflexive method that reveals the richness of description. According to Conrad, the online learning community builds community through the learners’ sense of and practice of the concept of social presence. Although her group of online adult learners also met face-to-face, Conrad believes that the design and facilitation of online community supports stronger

learning outcomes: “The presence of consistent and meaningful community among online learners has been established in the constructivist view as key in sustaining the type of interactive exchange that in turn promotes both retention and knowledge-building” (p. 7). She notes somewhat ironically that in the online learning community “There is no distance: you cannot run and you cannot hide” (p. 15). In contrast, she describes the “porousness” of face-to-face classes with coffee breaks, new unplanned topics introduced, changes of pace, rearrangement of space that doesn’t exist online. In spite of the potential richness of textual presence online, she finds that the rigidity of the technology imposes certain stresses. For example, the permanence of archiving the discussions intimidates some learners, as Mann (2003) reported about herself as an online learner in her personal inquiry research.

Conrad (2002a) finds that the pressure of course requirements leaves little time for socializing in the Café. In Conrad’s assessment, “Their use of the medium was functional, organized, time-driven, and carefully evaluated” (p. 15). Silences and spaces reveal as much as conversations. She concludes: “I did not get the sense that most learners in my study interacted with the community emotionally at the level of deep connection or shared character that would sustain lasting relationships” (p. 14). She encourages further research that spans the vicissitudes of online learning communities in longitudinal studies that capture the ebb and flow of time and its influence on the development of human relationships in virtual education settings. In what way, I wonder, does the online learning community that contemplates the face of God develop even deeper connections or engage more emotionally with one another? Or does the pressure of academic achievement override the search for personal and spiritual connections? In what way does time influence the building of this community built for faith formation?

Time and Community

Conrad (2005) followed her previous study with a longitudinal study of an online graduate cohort that was together for at least two years. She states, “The longitudinal nature of this study allowed me to include the dimension of time as a factor in understanding how online learners perceive the building and maintaining of online community” (p. 2). One of the most descriptive contributions of her research is her definition of the online community: “It simulates the comforts of home (usually accessed from the comfort of home), provides a safe climate, an atmosphere of trust and respect, is a gathering place for like-minded individuals who share a journey of similar activities, purposes, and goals”(p. 2). In what way does a virtual community become a home?

Conrad (2005) found that over time the cohort’s own definition of community becomes more affective and less purposeful. While they first use terminology such as “group, technology, and exchange” and define community in terms of purpose, time, and place, as time passes their descriptions emphasize relationships and interconnectedness. Conrad concludes, “Learners appeared to have shifted from considering community in its external dimensions as an entity defined by temporality, action, and space to a more intuitively understood, relationship-based construct” (p. 7). One of the students noted that the vehicle of educational delivery, the online community, which she envisioned as a train station, had in fact become a destination. Conrad noted that over time students take more responsibility for developing a sense of community themselves.

The Language of Community

Conrad (2005) also discovered that the permanency of archived discussions, while initially intimidating to some learners, becomes the source of wisdom and

growing intimacy: "Their community grew hand in hand, as it were, with the written word" (p. 16). Conrad's review of theory and recent research on the importance of community as a key variable in successful online learning reveals the role that language plays:

This evolution was most strongly noted in the change of language used by learners to describe their sense of community: language that moved from issues of place and space to issues of relationship. (p. 17)

Conrad's conclusions support not only the importance of the development of community as vital to learning, but especially significant to my research, the importance of language. This finding supports the need for a hermeneutical phenomenological method that begins with lived experience and explores the contours of language in the online community whose purpose is contemplative and theological.

Mann (2003), who described her personal experience in an online learning community as failure, also acknowledges the importance of language: "...how we use language is inextricably bound to our knowledge and frameworks of assumption, and when we use language we can't help but act and construct reality and understanding through it" (p. 118).

Dr. Heidi Campbell (2005a) of the University of Edinburgh quoted Nunes (1995, p. 326) as pointing out that in the virtual world the focus moves from the messenger to the message:

...in the virtual world of the Internet, our words are our bodies where people become known by their words or their taglines. The texts presented become a defining factor of who one is in cyberspace and what one does. Through texts, readers construct mental images of the other... texts are seen as representing the totality of the particular producer... (p. 113)

What are the ethical dimensions of language when text defines identity in the online community that contemplates the face of Christ, I wonder?

The Ethical Presence of Community

Mann (2003) quoted Derrida on the language of community. Derrida did not like community because of its inevitable exclusivity:

Derrida does not like the word 'community'. He is concerned by its potential for closure, identification with itself and its association with the idea of fortification...he argues that the idea of community (a concept which carries within it notions of belonging, solidarity, identity) cannot help but also include ideas of exclusion, i.e. of those who do not belong. According to Derrida, a community can never be fully inclusive; it must always have insiders and outsiders. (p. 120)

Mann resolves Derrida's concern and her own failure of community online by arguing for the ethical dimension of participation in a community of learners. She takes the position that learners and teachers must "develop a stance of openness to the Other — the Other of the teacher, learners, the subject of study itself" (p. 122). She lists five aspects of ethical behavior to ensure that the online community remains inclusive: (a) provide hospitality and welcome; (b) the negotiation of safety; (c) the telling of stories of experience to identify with differences and shared humanity; (d) the addressing of power and its workings in the group and, (e) the application of criticality through reflection and discussion on both the processes of the group and the subject of the study. She places primary responsibility on teaching presence to ensure an ethical stance in the online community.

Cardinal Karol Wojtyla (1976/1993), who became Pope John Paul II in 1978, as a philosopher links community to a proper understanding of the human person as a personal subject whose actions display a transcendence that reveals the spiritual nature of the human person. He believes the human being is revealed as a person primarily in and through action: "Human action is conscious human activity in which the freedom proper to the human person is simultaneously expressed and concretized" (p. 225). As a

leader for years under a totalitarian regime, John Paul II insists that community is not the multiplicity of people, but the unity within the multiplicity:

A community...a particular multiplicity of people—of personal subjects—forms a social unity and may be examined from the perspective of the consciousness and lived experience of all its members and also in some sense each of them. Only then do we arrive at the reality of community and detect its proper meaning. (p. 239)

People fulfill themselves in and through community. However, he emphasized, “To participate in the humanity of another human being means to be vitally related to the other as a particular human being, and not just related to what makes the other a human being” (p. 237). He explains, “Humanity is not an abstraction or generality, but has in each human being the particular ‘specific gravity’ of a personal being...in each instance unique and unrepeatable” (p. 237).

Emily Dickinson (1961) likewise linked the value of her own life, not to intellectual accomplishments, but to her service of love and care, not for others in general, but for one Heart or one Life or one Robin as the expression of her commitment to life lived in community, made up of unique individual members:

If I can stop one Heart from breaking
I shall not live in vain
If I can ease one Life the Aching
Or cool one Pain

Or help one fainting Robin
Unto his Nest again
I shall not live in Vain. (1890, p. 221)

In what way do the participants in the online community formed by the call of faith demonstrate through their human actions their understanding of community as the lived experience of all their members and each of them, I wonder? What is the strength of the bonds of community that are forged in distance made present through

computer-mediated technology? What will the computer-mediated learning community teach us about human presence in distance?

Resting in Presence

Chapter Two has traversed the mysterious terrain of human presence within computer-mediated technology. In what way is the online learning community present as a human community marked by openness to divine presence within technology? What is the meaning of presence in distance? In what way is presence absent or absence presence in the computer-mediated community that contemplates the face of Christ? My review of research findings in Chapter Two reverberate the insight of Heidegger (1953/1993c): "...the essence of technology is by no means anything technological" (p. 311).

The theme of presence in Chapter Two emerges in my effort to explore the call of my question: *What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?* Presence is a conceptual term in most distance education research, but I am called to research presence as lived experience. I, too, wrestle with the language of presence as I reflect on the contributions of other research.

In Chapter Two I seek to uncover presence in the lifeworld of distance education, as dwelling within technology, as richness in absence, as solitude, silence, text, home, place, time, and community. In addition to the contributions of other research, I search for understanding in the richness of literature and poetry, seeking the insights of Emily Dickinson, Rainer Maria Rilke, Thomas Aquinas, and Thomas Merton.

Presence has theological and philosophical meanings that call for deeper reflection in my study of lived experience in Chapter Three, as I am called to this community that contemplates the face of Christ through computer-mediated technology. Chapter Three begins by unfolding the method of van Manen (2003), a phenomenologist who promotes a pedagogical framework to open the researcher to the

lived experience of standing in relationship to the world as teacher and learner. This framework ensures that my research reflects my identity as an educator—a teacher and student of presence in distance. Van Manen insists that hermeneutic phenomenology calls me to stand in a thoughtful pose toward my research as an educator and catechist who contemplates the face of Christ:

In the works of the great phenomenologists, thoughtfulness is described as a minding, a heeding, a caring attunement—a heedful, mindful wondering about the project of life, of living, of what it means to live a life. (p. 12)

I seek the foundational understanding of philosophers who lead me to wonder and wander in the mystery of language as the literature of human presence. The call of my question illuminates the design of the investigation that follows.

CHAPTER THREE:
PRESENCE IN DISTANCE: PHILOSOPHICAL UNDERSTANDINGS AND THE
METHOD OF THE INVESTIGATION

The rushing stream cannot wonder,
As it descends, and the woods silently slope,
Following its rhythm
—but man can wonder!
The threshold which the world crosses in him
Is the threshold of wonder.
(John Paul II, 2003, p. 8)

Each day is a secret story woven around
The radiant heart of wonder.
(O'Donohue, 1999, p. 77)

Hermeneutic phenomenology is a human science that invites me to research the wonder of persons. Van Manen (2003) distinguished between the human science of phenomenology and other sciences whose studies are based on subjects or even individuals, a term that is “primarily a biological term of classification” (p. 6). Van Manen explains, “...the term *person* refers to the uniqueness of each human being” (p. 6). Quoting the poet, W. H. Auden, he continues, “As persons, we are incomparable, unclassifiable, uncountable, irreplaceable” (p. 6). John Paul II (Wojtyla, 1976/1993), as philosopher and phenomenologist, echoes the wonder of the human person as he insists that, in every instance, the human person as a concrete self is unique and unrepeatable.

The Call of Wonder

Van Manen (2003) contrasts positivist research methodologies with a hermeneutic phenomenological method. Traditional research that tests hypotheses and conducts experiments seeks knowledge that is generalizable. Subjects and samples are replaceable; actions and interventions are repeatable. Phenomenology, in van Manen’s

language is “a philosophy or theory of the unique; it is interested in what is essentially not replaceable” (p. 7). It begins with wondering, a human response to the call of the lifeworld of the human person. As a distance educator, I am called to wonder about the human person who lives within the technology of computer-mediated communication. My wonder is pedagogical.

Robert Sokolowski (1994), a contemporary phenomenologist in the Husserlian tradition, explains the contemporary appeal of phenomenology:

The reason we tend to dismiss appearances as merely subjective and accidental is that we remain caught in the prejudices of our modern age which devalues appearances and devalues the direct experience we have of things, giving preference to the scientific knowledge of the thing as the only reliable access to truth. Appearances are taken as mere appearances; perception is taken as a form of imagination. (p. 26)

The etymology of wonder is “something that causes astonishment, marvel, the quality of wonderfulness...a deed performed or an event brought about by supernatural power...a miracle” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 3809). Heidegger (1954/1993c) suggests that wonder is a human response to the disclosure of the mystery of unconcealment that remains independent of our control, although it responds to the watchfulness and attentiveness of our questioning. He reminds us in the *Question Concerning Technology* that we do not control what addresses itself to us as wonder:

Man can indeed conceive, fashion, and carry through this or that in one way or another. But man does not have control over unconcealment itself, in which at any given time the actual shows itself or withdraws. (p. 323)

The Context of Wonder

Chapter Three is set in the context of a living online learning community that exists in a cyberspace place called the Online Campus of The Catholic Distance University (CDU). The online campus is filled with personalities, humor,

thoughtfulness, frustration, pain, kindness, and friendship present always in the mystery of text. It includes places created by text that names rooms where students gather online such as the reception area, the cohort rooms where they meet to discuss program requirements with the Dean of Students, the course rooms, the chapel, the seminars, and the café (See Appendix D). Why do we talk in the language of rooms, I wonder? It is because these are real places where real people meet, interact, and change. Yet, this world is created only with text from computers connected to the Internet. Those who live in the online campus are students and faculty, staff and technicians who are present only by their absence. Students live in the online campus for at least three years to complete a degree or earn a Catechetical Diploma. Those who graduate become known as alumni; their leaving is gradual, allowing time to slowly disengage from their presence, looking for a way to remain present in distance as a mentor to new students. As a distance educator, I wonder about the essence of human community in persons called to contemplate the face of Christ within technology. Who are the human persons who create presence in text? In what way will philosophical understandings help me to discover the meaning structures of persons who dwell in text?

The Presence of Wonder

Through the technology of computer-mediated communication, Tad, a Catholic hospital chaplain in Florida and online graduate student at CDU, interacts with a computer keyboard to share the intimate details of his faith journey. In a few short minutes and two pages of text, he crosses two continents and spans sixty years of his own history of the last century, including World War II. At a particular moment in his graduate study, he is inspired to reveal the memories of his heart as text projected on the computer screens of his classmates, as far away as the European continent he left so many years before. His deceased Polish grandmother, his *Babcia*, becomes present to a new community...present in distance. Could she be more present in absence than she

was when Tad was growing up and sleeping in the room next to hers? “Truly my *Babcia* taught me how to pray. I did not understand it when she was alive. I do understand it now.”

Paula finishes reading Tad’s story projected on her computer screen at work. She acknowledges the power of his written reflection: “I’m at work, so it’s hard to cry, or I’d be crying. No one in their right mind would think I’m crying over the newspaper...”

Tad’s poignant recollection calls forth the memory of two other “*Babcias*” in the online community. Another student whose Polish mother escaped a work camp in Germany during World War II writes:

I have a very difficult time getting my mother to talk about the war...But I will tell her that I have made a Polish friend at school and ask her the name of the camp that she was placed in. It is wonderful to be able to have this online resource to chat with each other...Tad, I will get back to you as soon as I call my mother.

What is revealed in the presence of text and the absence of the human body in the computer-mediated learning community? In what way does presence of text become presence of community? What do I see in text?

The Wonder of Writing

Van Manen (2003) explains the paradox of writing for the human science researcher. Writing abstracts us from lived experience, yet it places us in a self-reflective stance that opens to a deeper awareness of the structures of meaning hidden within the experience:

The narrative power of story is that sometimes it can be more compelling, more moving, more physically and emotionally stirring than lived-life itself. Textual emotion, textual understanding can bring an otherwise sober-minded person (the reader but also the author) to tears and to a more deeply understood worldly engagement. (p. 129)

The power of writing is the primary tool of the human science researcher. Van Manen (2003) comments: "Writing plays the inner against the outer, the subjective self against the objective self, the ideal against the real" (p. 129).

The archives of Edmund Husserl, the father of phenomenology, at the University of Louvain are dominated by the presence of his desk, a symbol of the imperative to write for the phenomenologist. Van Manen (2003) explains, "...specifically for hermeneutic phenomenological work, writing is closely fused into the research activity and reflection itself" (pp. 125-126). What is called forth to become present in the writing of text in an online community in search of the face of Christ, I wonder?

The Wonder of Text

As a researcher of the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community, I have been called to wonder about language in text produced by a machine. The online community is computer-mediated; adult learners become members of a learning community by interacting with the technology of a personal computer connected to the Internet. They become present to one another by electronically producing and transmitting text through a computer network. Their interaction with text makes them present to one another at the very moment that each online learner becomes present to the text, no matter when the text was first created. What is the essence of human presence revealed in text? In what way are human faces visible in text? In what way does text reveal the presence of the face of Christ to this community that calls to me?

Text is the structure of the online learning community at CDU. The etymology of *text* is theological. It is originally French and refers to the Scriptures or the Gospel. Over time it acquires the more general meaning of written characters, but the root is *texere*, to weave. It is the tissue of a literary work, literally that which is woven, a web, a texture (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 238).

The Wonder of the Net

I recall Peter, the fisherman, a man who mended nets by the Sea of Galilee who was chosen to be a fisher of men. For another fisher of men, John Paul II, Peter's net becomes the Internet in the third millennium. The text of the online learning community is literally formed by an electronic web woven with invisible threads that hearkens to the sacred web of the word of God in Sacred Scripture. What is caught in this new net, I wonder? In what way does electronic text woven with sacred text weave the presence of human community? In what way does the text of this community make the face of Christ present, as he is present in the written word of God in Sacred Scripture?

As an educator of presence in distance, I have been called to "put out into the deep" of the new net of text made present through the Internet. What is the meaning of presence in the net of text? As a researcher, I am reminded by van Manen (2003) that the meaning of research is "to question something by going back again and again to the things themselves until that which is put to question begins to reveal something of its essential nature" (p. 43).

Philosophical Understandings in the Call of the Question

The importance of the question for me, the meaning of text as human presence—pedagogical and theological—draws me to philosophers who are also called by the question in response to lived experience.

Gabriel Marcel

The Catholic existentialist philosopher, Gabriel Marcel (1937/1951/1967), writes of philosophy:

...that it is nothing if it is not a search; but to search is to hope to find; it is to tend towards something definitive...to be sure, it is a search for the Truth (p. 16)...not particular truths...the truth toward which philosophical research aspires is

essentially unpossessable; in any event it cannot be considered or treated as a having. (p. 18)

Marcel makes a distinction between objectified thought and philosophical thought. Objectified thought or primary reflection is *a having* that solves problems, can be verified by objective laws, and exists outside the investigator; philosophical thought is a participation *in being*, and dwells in mystery. According to Miceli (1965), Marcel understands mystery as “too vast to be fully comprehended by the limited and involved mind of man...the unverifiable lies in the land of mystery” (pp. 97-98). Miceli distinguishes philosophical reflection as “a way of being, of participating” (p. 101). The hermeneutic phenomenological method I employ in this study is a participation in the being of community as the participants and the researcher become co-researchers in the study of lived experience. Marcel, according to Gallagher (1958), “re-establishes the primacy of the existential” (as cited in Miceli, p. 100). Marcel (1937/1951/1967) links philosophical thought with hermeneutical interpretation of text, which is part of the research process in the study of lived experience: “What is true of the reading of a text applies almost exactly to the philosophical search as I understand it. It is in reality an interpretation” (p. 19).

Marcel’s understanding of *intersubjectivity* also guides my understanding of the human person in the online learning community. According to Miceli (1965):

Marcel has found that man never attains his being, his *I*, until he freely and generously enters into the tension of an *intersubjective* communication with the other which ceases to treat the other as an *it* or *him*, but accepts the other as a *thou*.” (p. 104)

The essence of Marcel’s philosophy is the notion of participation. In *Presence and Immortality*, (1937/1951/1967) he expresses the meaning of participation, which describes the relationship of persons as community: “The most authentic philosophic thought, it seems to me, situates itself at the meeting point of the self and the other” (p. 26). He

quotes an American philosopher, W.E. Hocking, (1921), whose thinking impresses him greatly because it elaborates on his own notion of participation: "Hocking...has established that we cannot really conceive an apprehending of the other which is not truly an apprehending of ourselves and which confers on our experience its human weight" (p. 26).

Miceli (1965) emphasizes the importance of lived experience in Marcel's philosophy of community:

His philosophy plunges into the infinite complexities of lived experience in all its concreteness and encounters the 'sting of the real.' Participation is the key to his philosophizing. Man has no isolated experiences of existence. For man to be is to be-in-a situation. Man becomes conscious of the only self he really knows by participating actively and freely within a dynamically interacting world and within inter-subjective communion with other persons. (p. 11)

What does Marcel's (Miceli, 1965) understanding of community as participation reveal about the lived experience of the electronically-mediated community? Marcel's philosophical understandings accompany my research as I seek to uncover the essence of the virtual community as human participation that seeks the presence of God in the text of human community:

The only way I can fully discover and express the *I* of myself is through communion with the *thou* of the other, for I am fully realized only in the *thou* that responds to my appeal and crosses the threshold of my mind and heart. (Miceli, p. 109)

Marcel's thought confronts my search for presence in distance, as he links philosophical thought to participation in being and convinces me that the desire to dwell in mystery is ontologically a journey undertaken in the community of *we*.

John Paul II

John Paul II, as Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, (1976/1993) and as phenomenologist and Thomistic philosopher, presents a philosophy of the human person as subject and

community. He finds a connection between the subjectivity of the human being as person and the structure of human community. He acknowledges the contemporary controversy about the meaning of human existence and the nature and significance of the human being. His philosophy of the human person is founded on the truth that each human being in every instance is a concrete, unique, and unrepeatable person. As human beings we are persons by nature. Our personhood is revealed mainly in and through our actions. Our actions are not divorced from our particular selves. Every action, choice, and decision we make brings our subjectivity “out of the dark and makes it a distinct phenomenon of human experience” (p. 230). What is revealed in the subjectivity of the human persons whose human experience is presence in distance in search of the face of Christ in the online learning community?

Our actions display a transcendence that John Paul II (Wojtyla, 1993) defines as “the spirituality of the human being revealing itself” (p. 233). The desire toward self-fulfillment reveals that the human person is somehow incomplete. The human desire for self-fulfillment is linked to transcendence, whose etymology is a “going-out-beyond or a rising-above” (p. 233). John Paul II writes:

Without this transcendence—without going out beyond myself and somehow rising above myself in the direction of truth and in the direction of a good willed and chosen in the light of truth—I as a person, I as a personal subject, in a sense am not myself...In fulfilling an action, I fulfill myself in it if the action is good (in accord with my conscience)...I myself become good and am good as a human being...the fulfillment of a person is related to transcendence, to the transcendent dimension of the action. (p. 235)

John Paul II’s (Wojtyla, 1993) understanding of community is rooted in the meaning of the human person: “Humanity is not an abstraction. To participate in the humanity of another human being means to be vitally related to the other as a particular human being” (p. 237). John Paul II’s definition of community is based on this understanding:

By community I understand “that which unites.” In the I-thou relationship, an authentic interpersonal community develops if the I and the thou abide in a mutual affirmation of the transcendent value of the person (a value that may also be called dignity) and confirm this by their acts. (p. 246)

The superiority of the *we* in a social community is derived from the common good that is more fully expressed and actualized than as a good of each subject:

Community, the human *we*, in its various dimensions, signifies a human multiplicity with the kind of structure in which the person as a subject is maximally actualized...the subject as a person has a distinctive priority in relation to community. (p. 252)

John Paul II (Wojtyla, 1993) makes clear that an authentic community derives from the dignity and uniqueness of each person as a personal subject whose goodness may be actualized more fully in the common good of the community. He uses the term *participation* to emphasize not that persons exist and act together with others, but that in their participation in community, they are capable of fulfilling themselves in this activity and existence. He calls this the “irrevocable primacy of the personal subject in relation to community—we can say nothing essential about this multiplicity as a community—unless we proceed from the human being as a personal subject” (p. 237). He writes from the lived experience of leading the Catholic Church under the domination of a Marxist-inspired communist socialist government whose understanding of the social good was always at the expense of the individual as personal subject. John Paul II emphasizes the particularity of each human being as the ultimate “basis for the whole distinctive character of the evangelical concept of *neighbor*” (p. 237).

Martin Heidegger

Heidegger (1927/1993a) also draws me to accompany him in written text, not just because he dwells in the call of the question, but because of the relationship between the question and what precedes the question, as what is given “in the thing itself”:

Every questioning is a seeking. Every seeking takes its direction beforehand from what is sought. Questioning is a knowing search for beings in their thatness and whatness. (p. 45)

Heidegger’s question is the search for being that he identifies with a capital *B*: “Insofar as Being constitutes what is asked about, and insofar as Being means the Being of beings, beings themselves turn out to be what is interrogated in the question of Being” (p. 47). He calls the uniqueness of the being that questions its being, *Dasein*:

Dasein is a being that does not simply occur among other beings. Rather it is ontically distinguished by the fact that in its Being this being is concerned about its very Being...It is proper to this being that it be disclosed to itself with and through its Being. (p. 53)

Heidegger (1927/1993a) writes about phenomenology as a philosophy of the thatness and whatness of being: “The term phenomenology expresses a maxim that can be formulated, ‘To the things themselves!’” (p. 72). The root word is Greek, meaning “to show itself...the self-showing, the manifest” (p. 73). He argues against philosophical systems and in favor of phenomenology as a “discipline that can be developed only from the compelling necessity of definite questions and procedures demanded by the “things themselves” (p. 72).

In the study of text, I am lured by the depth of meaning so powerful that I am called to wonder if human presence and community hide in abstract symbols on a computer screen. Heidegger suggests a divine dimension to Being, as he likens our relationship to Being in language reminiscent of Christ’s identity as the Good Shepherd:

Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being.

Man loses nothing in this 'less'; rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being. He gains the essential poverty of the shepherd, whose dignity consists in being called by Being itself into the preservation of Being's truth...Man is the neighbor of Being. (1947/1993b, p. 245)

Heidegger describes our relationship to Being as one of care and service to the truth of Being. Community as the relationship of man to Being is defined in the language of nearness and neighbor. Yet, unlike the unique and unrepeatable stamp of each human person that marks the philosophy of John Paul II, for Heidegger what makes us unique is our relationship to Being, a word of profound significance to him that is capitalized, but not personalized.

Hans-Georg Gadamer

Gadamer (1960/1999) draws me to dwell in the question of text. In reflecting on Socrates, he notes that it is more difficult to ask questions than to answer them. He ascribes to Plato the insight that "There is a profound recognition of the priority of the question in all knowledge and discourse that really reveals something of an object. Discourse that is intended to reveal something requires that that thing be broken open by the question" (p. 363). He agrees with Socrates that "The important thing is the knowledge that one does not know" (p. 365). He comments, "Deciding the question is the path to knowledge...Only a person who has questions can have knowledge" (pp. 364-365). As a model for my own phenomenological search inspired by a question, Gadamer shows "how the questioner becomes the one who is questioned and how the hermeneutical occurrence is realized in the dialectic of the question" (p. 462). The dialectic of my question resides in text that reveals my identity as writer and interpreter, researcher, and subject.

Gadamer (1960/1999) not only celebrates the significance of the question, but illuminates the primacy and richness of language in the hermeneutical process of

interpretation. He writes about language: "Rather, in language the order and structure of our experience itself is originally formed and constantly changed...It is from language as a medium that our whole experience of the world, and especially hermeneutical experience, unfolds" (p. 457). Gadamer provides the philosophical foundation for helping me to understand the richness of human presence and community in the presence of text in the online learning community. He characterizes the hermeneutical dimension of text as play: "...as in genuine dialogue, something emerges that is contained in neither of the partners by himself" (p. 462). He describes the way in which philosophical tradition is reinterpreted in each succeeding age: "Inasmuch as the tradition is newly expressed in language, something comes into being that had not existed before and that exists from now on" (p. 462). The richness of text in the online community open to the face of Christ reveals the openness of being in the community of persons that exceeds the individual being of each participant. The sharing of being in text that contemplates the face of Christ is fruitful and life-giving. Gadamer opens my mind to this possibility.

The lure of my question that questions presence as embodiment in text generated within technology draws me to these philosophical understandings that illuminate my question. What is the essence of technology in the longing to belong of the learning community formed by faith? Heidegger (1953/1993c) warns that we must go beyond the technological to reveal the essence of technology:

So long as we represent technology as an instrument, we remain transfixed in the will to master it. We press on past the essence of technology...The essence of technology points to the mystery of all revealing, i.e., of truth. (p. 38)

In the computer mediated learning community, the essence of technology is revealed as a call to search for truth through language. Identity and community occur through electronically mediated text projected on computer screens. Thus, to examine the lived

experience of adult faith formation in an online community is to explore the phenomenon of language.

Josef Pieper

German Thomistic philosopher, Josef Pieper (1986/1992), reflects on the richness of language and its importance to philosophical understandings:

Presumably Plato, Aristotle, Saint Augustine, and Saint Thomas knew precisely what they were doing when they started any discussion by querying linguistic usage...Nevertheless, it would be wrong to imagine that determining what is truly meant by the living language of men is an easily mastered task. On the contrary, there is much evidence that it is virtually impossible to exhaust the wealth of meanings in words, especially root words, and to paraphrase them precisely...Then again it seems to be the other side of the coin that an individual ordinarily, when he uses words unselfconsciously, usually means more than he ever consciously realizes. For a part of living usage is not only what men actually say but what they do not explicitly say. (pp. 19-20)

Pieper, not as a phenomenologist but as a philosopher, recognizes the depth of meaning in the silence of text. The silence that dwells in the text of the online community is the essence of technology that Heidegger calls *techne*, the mysterious revealing of truth and beauty.

O'Donohue (2004) writes about the influence of the mind and soul on our ability to recognize beauty. He explains that what we find beautiful outside ourselves is a reflection of our inner world. He points out a more subtle meaning to the common expression, "Beauty is in the eye of the beholder": "If our style of looking becomes beautiful, then beauty will become visible and shine forth for us...The graced eye can glimpse beauty anywhere...When we beautify our gaze, the grace of hidden beauty becomes our joy and our sanctuary" (p. 19). What is revealed in digitized text, I wonder, that reveals the beauty of both the writer and the reader within the online community?

Silence in the Language of Being

Van Manen (2003) describes hermeneutic phenomenological research as attentiveness to the part and whole, the contingent and the essential...“the consequential in the inconsequential, the significant in the taken-for-granted” (p. 8). The writing of phenomenological descriptions is “compelling and insightful” (p. 8) because the challenges of the writing process eventually reveal “the silence in the writing—the cultivation of one’s being, from which the words begin to proliferate in haltingly issued groupings, then finally in a carefully written work...” (p. 8). Van Manen continues to describe the writing process in language that consciously addresses the phenomenon of silence:

Phenomenology is like poetry, in that it speaks partly through silence: it means more than it explicitly says. Phenomenology, like poetry, intends to be silent as it speaks. It wants to be implicit as it explicates. So, to read or write phenomenologically requires that we be sensitively attentive to the silence around the words by means of which we attempt to disclose the deep meaning of our world. (p. 131)

As a researcher of a community that becomes present in text, I must be attentive to the sounds of silence that dwell hidden within the language of the community. Van Manen (2003) warns that in the writing process, “Attentiveness to form is also attentiveness to content” (p. 131). Gadamer (1960/1999) describes the rigor of the hermeneutical process as that of “uninterrupted listening” (p. 465):

Thus, every word, as the event of a moment, carries with it the unsaid, to which it is related by responding and summoning...All human speaking is finite in such a way that there is laid up within it an infinity of meaning to be explicated and laid out. (p. 458)

Solitude and Community

Catholic theologian Henri Nouwen (1975) proposes a powerful link between solitude and community that may offer insight into the lived experience of the online community. He suggests that solitude may actually strengthen the ties of community: "Solitude does not pull us away from our fellow human beings but instead makes real fellowship possible" (p. 42). The silent connection to the Internet for the lone adult learner who waits patiently for the appearance of text on a computer screen opens to the welcome of a human community reaching out in the silence of text. Thomas Merton describes in his diary the apparent contradiction of living the experience of deeper community as a contemplative monk and hermit:

It is in deep solitude that I find the gentleness with which I can truly love my brothers. The more solitary I am, the more affection I have for them. It is pure affection and filled with reverence for the solitude of others. (as cited in Nouwen, 1975, p. 42)

Do the members of the online learning community dwell in a stronger community because they dwell in silence? At what point and in what way does loneliness become fruitful solitude?

Anne Morrow Lindbergh (1975) describes the same phenomenon of community in solitude in her essay to women called *Gift of the Sea*. She distinguishes physical solitude from spiritual alienation that does in fact create a wall that separates us from one another:

Yes, I felt closer to my fellow men too, even in my solitude. For it is not physical solitude that actually separates one from other men, not physical isolation, but spiritual isolation. It is not the desert island nor the stony wilderness that cuts you from the people you love. It is the wilderness in the mind, the desert wastes in the heart through which one wanders lost and a stranger. When one is a stranger to oneself then one is estranged from others too...Only when one is connected to one's own core is one connected to others, I am beginning to

discover. And, for me, the core, the inner spring, can best be refound through solitude. (p. 38)

Lindbergh's essay suggests to me the possibility that the silence of text in the online learning community may provide a space to remain true to one's core, to be able to listen to the truth of one's heart and more easily share that inner truth with others in a community made present through text. In fact, there may be a sense of freedom from the authoritarian demands of physical presence—the prejudices, and seemingly involuntary reactions to physical presence that sometimes makes the physical encounter difficult to reveal one's interior thoughts of mind and heart. These ways of being do reach out for communion with others—to express openly the longing to belong.

The Wonder of the Word

In what way does the contemplative stance of dwelling in text reveal the face of Christ more clearly? He, too, promises presence in distance to his earthly companions, as he physically departs from them for the last time on Mount Olivet: "I will be with you always, even to the end of the world" (*The New Testament*, 2006, Mt. 28:20; Acts 1:12).

Sokolowski (1994) explains the contribution of phenomenology to a deeper understanding of the sacramental presence of Christ in the Eucharist as presence in absence. He calls this the theology of disclosure. Using Husserl's theme of identity and appearance—particulars and universals—he shows how Christ is present in a manifold of appearances in his sacramental presence in the Eucharist, in the Scriptures, in prayer, preaching, and the Christian life, and in each Christian. He describes the Eucharist as a true sign of divine presence because in the Mass "the sacramental appearance brings an increase in identity and being" (p. 32). The mode of presentation of the sacrifice on the cross has changed; in addition, the Mass is a presentation not just before us, but before

the eternal Father; thus, “The Eucharist transcends time for us because it presents itself before the transcendence of God” (p. 33).

The Language of God

The language of God in the words of transubstantiation in the Mass become the reality they signify unlike human language, which only symbolizes meaning in temporal reality. Gadamer (1960/1999) reflects on the difference between the language of God and the language of man:

...the word of God is the word of the Spirit that knows and creates everything in one intuition. The act of production disappears in the immediacy of divine omniscience. Creation is not a real process, but only interprets the structure of the universe in a temporal scheme. (p. 424)

Gadamer contrasts the word of God with the words of man: “Unlike the divine word, the human word is essentially incomplete. No human word can express our mind completely...From this essential imperfection it follows that the human word is not one, like the divine word, but must necessarily be many words” (p. 425). In the online community, I wonder, in what way does the ability to use many words enhance or detract from presence?

A Linguistic Method

Van Manen (2003) explains that human science research in education is “textual reflection” (p. 4), calling for a linguistic approach to phenomenology and hermeneutics:

What is novel to this text is that research and writing are seen to be closely related, and practically inseparable pedagogical activities (p. 4)...human science research is a form of writing. Creating a phenomenological text is the object of the research process. (p. 111)

To conduct a hermeneutic phenomenological research study is to create text about text. As the online community is actualized through text, this research study is a journey

through text that searches with the tools of text and is carried out in the act of creating new text in the hope that the truth within the text will be revealed. Van Manen explains, "It is in and through the words that the shining through (the invisible) becomes visible" (p. 130).

The Wonder of Language

Heidegger (1959/1971) writes about the relationship of language to being. He proposes that being resides in words: "The being of anything that is, resides in the word...No thing is where the word is lacking...Language is the house of being" (pp. 62-63). By describing language as a house, Heidegger emphasizes the form or structure of language that gives us a way of being in the world which, as house, implies security and community. He comments, "Language, in granting all this to man, is the foundation of human being" (p. 112). Language is the way in which being reveals itself.

Heidegger (1959/1971) explicates the meaning of language in a poem by Stefan George called "The Word," that suggests the link between language and being: "Where word breaks off, no thing may be" (p. 64). Reflecting on his interpretation of the meaning of this last line of the poem he comments: "No, nothing is clear; but everything is significant" (p. 64).

Moran (2000) describes the essential meaning of language in the writings of Merleau-Ponty who believed that speech was an expression of embodiment; thought could not exist without language, which requires articulation in speech. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes:

A thought limited to existing for itself, independently of the constraints of speech and communication, would no sooner appear than it would sink into the unconscious, which means that it would not exist even for itself...The orator does not think before speaking, nor even while speaking; his speech is his thought. (as cited in Moran, p. 425)

Moran concludes that for Merleau-Ponty, "Thought is incarnated in speech in the same manner that the mind is incarnated in the body" (p. 425). If Merleau-Ponty is correct that thought is speech, in the online community, is thought written text? In what way is the self also incarnated in technology when text is electronically projected? What is lost or gained when thought bypasses speech and becomes text? What is the weight of electronically projected words? What are the contours of the mind revealed only in text?

John O'Donohue (1999) links thought to longing in a linguistic expression of desire that begins in the mind but does not originate there: "Thought is the form of the mind's desire. It is in our thinking that the depth of our longing comes to expression" (p. 96). Yet, I wonder, in what way does thinking come to expression, except through language? Language as text becomes the visual signpost of longing that reveals our desire to belong. Is longing present in the text of an online community? O'Donohue explains the longing in the mind as a reflection of the deeper mystery of the divine longing for us:

Our longing is passionate and endless because the divine calls us home to presence. Our longing is an echo of the divine longing for us. Our longing is the living imprint of divine desire. (p. 96)

John Paul II (1996) reflects on the influence of language in his own vocational journey to the priesthood. His academic career begins with a study of the Polish language and literature accompanied by a lifelong love of theatre. He, like O'Donohue, finds a link between language and God from the beginning of his university studies in Cracow:

Right from the beginning of the first year, however, I found myself attracted to the study of the [Polish] language itself...This opened up completely new horizons for me; it introduced me to the mystery of language itself...The word, before it is ever spoken on the stage, is already present in human history as a fundamental dimension of man's spiritual experience. Ultimately, the mystery of language brings us back to the inscrutable mystery of God himself. (p. 7)

In what way, I wonder, does text, which carries the weight of human presence in the online community, reveal the presence of God hidden in abstract symbols?

Heidegger (1953/1993c) links the root *techne* of technology to the same root word to describe the bringing forth of truth and beauty as *techne*: "There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *techne*. Once the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance was also called *techne*...The *poiesis* of the fine arts was also called *techne*" (p. 339). Heidegger suggests that the essence of technology not only shares the same root word, *techne*, with poetry and art, but may similarly unfold truth and beauty:

...we do not yet experience the essential unfolding of technology, that in our sheer aesthetic-mindedness we no longer guard and preserve the essential unfolding of art. Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes. (pp. 340-341)

In a later essay on language, Heidegger (1959/1971) turns to the poet as the one who sustains and reveals being itself:

The poet has experienced that only the word makes a thing appear as the thing it is, and thus lets it be present. The word avows itself to the poet as that which holds and sustains a thing in its being. The poet experiences an authority, a dignity of the word than which nothing vaster and loftier can be thought. But the word is also that possession with which the poet is trusted and entrusted as poet in an extraordinary way. The poet experiences his poetic calling as a call to the word as the source, the bourn of Being. (pp. 65-66)

Heidegger's glorification of the poet's "call to the word," a relationship to language with religious overtones is reminiscent of John Paul II's (1996) reflection on how the study of linguistics and literature led him to the seminary:

As I came to appreciate the power of the word in my literary and linguistic studies, I inevitably drew closer to the mystery of the Word...Later I came to realize that my study of Polish language and letters had prepared the ground for the encounter with philosophy and theology. (p. 8)

In what way, I wonder, does a community that dwells in the text of words come closer to the Word of God?

For Gadamer (1960/1999), language is the essence of our lived experience of the world. His philosophy of hermeneutics is an understanding of language as the way we encounter the world. He distinguishes between world as encountered by persons in language from other creatures who simply live in an environment: "But this world is verbal in nature...man's being in the world is primordially linguistic" (p. 443).

Language does not exist independently of us: "Language has no independent life apart from the world that comes to language within it" (p. 443). Language allows us a unique orientation to the world that distances us from the world and constitutes us as communal:

...it must be emphasized that language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding...It is a life process in which a community of life is lived out...All kinds of human community are kinds of linguistic community: even more, they form language. For language is by nature the language of conversation; as verbally constituted, it is always a human world that presents itself to us. (pp. 446-447)

The Language of Community

The online learning community is preeminently a linguistic community, as its existence is the projection of text on computer screens. Those who participate in the online community describe the community as a real community made up of persons whose personalities actually reflect physical, cognitive, social, and spiritual qualities. In the online community, there is no bodily presence; yet, experienced members of text-based online communities report the "reality" of human relationships that form online. Gadamer (1960/1999) addresses the communal dimension of language in *Truth and Method*: "It is clear that the life-world is always at the same time a communal world that involves being with other people as well" (p. 247).

Language of the Senses

The online learning community is constructed with only limited participation of the bodily senses. The visual sense of sight is the primary sense experience for online learners—sight that reveals abstract symbols on a computer screen and enables the mind to interpret them as a true expression of and real engagement with the richness and variety of human personality. This is ironic because the sense of sight in an online community is at the same time significantly diminished by the lack of human presence projected by the body. The sense of touch in the online community is limited to physical contact by each participant with a computer keyboard; these adult learners do not glance into each other's eyes, or shake hands, or pat each other's backs as a sign of recognition. The colors of hair, skin, and clothing are hidden in black and white text. The modulations of voice, the scent of male and female presence, exist only in the imagination. Community develops in the complex coordination of mind, hands, and keyboard, as the movement of hands creates language on a computer screen. Gadamer (1960/1999) captures the essence of our hermeneutical relationship to language:

What constitutes the hermeneutical event proper is not language as language, whether as grammar or as lexicon; it consists in the coming into language of what has been said...Thus it is literally more correct to say that language speaks us, rather than that we speak it...(p. 463)

Gadamer (1960/1999), like Merleau-Ponty (Moran, 2000), distinguishes between language as speech and language as text. What is the pedagogical significance of language as text in the online learning community? Language as speech is primary according to Gadamer: "When you look at something you can also look away from it by looking in another direction, but you cannot 'hear away'" (p. 462).

The Language of On and Off

In the online community, members have the freedom to “look away,” to turn off the presence of others in text by turning off the computer. Their exercise of control in participation is touted as a benefit. What is the significance of a community in which each member silently controls his or her participation with a click of the mouse and an on and off button on a machine? What is the meaning of participation when my call to the community resides in text that may not be seen for hours or days? My presence dwells in text that my classmates only see at their convenience, not mine. What do they know about me from my text? Is my text true to me? Do my classmates really care for me in my text when care is only communicated through text? In the tradition of Heidegger, I ask, “What is the being of text?”

Steven Jones (1995) questions the commitment to a community when presence is an on or off switch on a computer:

In the physical world, community members must live together. When community membership is in no small way a simple matter of subscribing or unsubscribing to a bulletin board or electronic newsgroup, is the nature of interaction different simply because one may disengage with little or no consequence? (p. 11)

In the language of Heidegger, what is the being of the learning community that contemplates the face of Christ through computer-mediated technology? Of what durability is the texture of the new net of the Internet for those who seek to be fishers of men in the third millennium? What lasts in the call of this community? What are the bonds that hold this community together? Can text alone impel me to seek full embodied presence, or am I content to dwell in text? Is there permanence in temporality in the online community that seeks the face of God?

The Language of Divine Absence

Sokolowski's (1994) discussion of the phenomenological theme of absence suggests a way of understanding presence in distance in the online learning community that dwells in divine presence. Sokolowski states: "Absence is a particularly important theme in the understanding of human existence and in thinking about being" (p. 194). He links Husserl's concept of universals to the absence of particular sense experience, and the notion of transcendence to absence (p. 194). "Being," in his words "is found in the interplay between presence and absence" (p. 194). In his theology of disclosure he describes the "absence of the sacred" (p. 195):

The divine is always more than what we can see or possess, and it is more in a way different from the way other things can be more than we perceive at any moment or the manner in which, say, our joy or anger can be more than what we experience in a given episode. (p. 195)

He describes the relationship between sacred presence and absence as a unique experience for those who encounter God; they live by faith as divine absence and the reality of divine presence:

...those to whom the identity of this God has been revealed, are exposed to a kind of absence and transcendence beyond those we encounter in our worldly involvements. We ourselves are changed by this transposition of presence and absence. We are stretched into a new context. A new kind of absence (an absence in faith), an expectation of a new kind of presence (in hope), and a new possibility of identification (in charity) are made possible. (p. 195)

As researcher, I wonder if Sokolowski's description of the new context of sacred presence and absence exists as presence in the online computer-mediated community that seeks the face of God. In what way could the limitation of presence in text actually enhance the divine presence that dwells in the text of this community?

A Phenomenological Research Framework

Van Manen (2003) describes the human science researcher as a “sensitive observer of the subtleties of everyday life” (p. 29). He explains that the researcher must be “steadfastly oriented to the lived experience” (p. 42) that awakens the sense of wonder out of which a research question emerges. The passion for observation and watchfulness of lived experience grows out of the work of Edmund Husserl, a German philosopher known affectionately as the father of phenomenology.

The Contribution of Edmund Husserl

In 1907 Edmond Husserl (1907/1999) introduced the concept of *pure seeing* in a series of lectures that would define a new phenomenological critique of knowledge and a *science of pure phenomena* (p. 2): “Every intellectual experience, indeed every experience whatsoever, can be made into an object of pure seeing and apprehension while it is occurring. And in this act of seeing it is an absolute givenness: It is given as an existing entity, as a ‘this-here’” (p. 24). He defines absolute self-evidence as “seeing, grasping what is self-given, insofar as it is an actual seeing that presents an actual self-givenness and not a givenness that refers to something not given...” (p. 38). He explains phenomenology as a science with its own method and goal:

Phenomenology carries out its clarifications in acts of seeing, determining, and distinguishing sense. It compares, it distinguishes, it connects, it places in relation, it divides into parts, it separates off moments. But it does all this in the act of pure seeing. It does not engage in theory or mathematical construction; that is, it offers no explanations in the sense of deductive theories. (p. 43)

Husserl claims the absolute importance of *pure seeing* in the phenomenological method: “...research must restrict itself to *pure seeing*—for it is research in the sphere of pure evidence, and moreover, it is research into essences” (p. 66). For Husserl the phenomenon of pure seeing brings knowledge, not only of particulars, but also of

universals. He asks whether the act of pure seeing only presents singular moments and parts or reveals universals:

Could not there also be a positing of other forms of givenness as the absolute givenness of, for instance, universals, where a universal would come to self-evident givenness in an act of seeing...? (p. 38)

He answers this question by showing that phenomenology reveals knowledge of both essences and universals:

For those who can place themselves in the position of *pure seeing*...it is easier to conceive of knowledge that can not only bring particulars, but also universals, universal objects, and universal states of affairs to absolute givenness...For it is the peculiar character of phenomenology to analyze and conduct research into essences within the framework of a reflection that involves only pure seeing, a framework of absolute self-givenness... (p. 39)

Husserl's (Moran, 2000) academic training was primarily mathematical; his doctoral dissertation topic was on calculus. Moran characterizes the influence of mathematics on Husserl's philosophical work by noting that "Husserl would write that he hoped to do for philosophy what Weierstrass had done for arithmetic—that is to set it on a single foundation" (p. 68). Husserl sought a systematic, scientific basis for phenomenology.

The concept of *pure seeing* that Husserl (1907/1999) conceives with a sense of mathematical certitude is challenged and more fully developed by succeeding phenomenological philosophers such as Heidegger (1927/1993a) and Gadamer (1960/1999) who, at one time, had been students of Husserl. Husserl is driven by a science of pure essences: "Husserl emphasized the importance of moving from the merely factual to the level of essential truths, of universal laws, of essences" (as cited in Moran, 2000, p. 135), while Heidegger in *Being and Time* (1927/1993a) writes about the finite temporal meaning of being in the world. Moran concludes that for Husserl, "True

phenomenology cannot be founded in any science of human being" (p. 191), which is relative, historical, and finite.

Gadamer (1960/1999) reflects on the contributions of Husserl by elaborating on Husserl's concept of particulars and universal essences as the two poles of phenomenology, characterized in the practical method of van Manen as consideration of parts and whole:

Husserl is obviously seeking to capture the way all limited intentionality of meaning merges into the fundamental continuity of the whole. A horizon is not a rigid boundary but something that moves with one and invites one to advance further (p. 245)...so Husserl shows that the unity of the flow of experience is prior to the discreteness of experiences and essentially necessary to it. (p. 249)

Gadamer develops the concept of hermeneutic interpretation in contrast to Husserl's pure seeing. Consciousness of interpretation is part of the process of questioning, according to Gadamer: "The hermeneutical task becomes of itself a questioning of things...The important thing is to be aware of one's own bias, so that the text can present itself in all its otherness and thus assert its own truth against one's own foremeanings" (p. 269). Gadamer recognizes the complexity of "seeing" as the "tyranny of hidden prejudices...The recognition that all understanding inevitably involves some prejudice gives the hermeneutical problem its real thrust" (p. 270).

Gadamer's description of the hermeneutical task calls me to be aware of my own prejudices when the research process is underway. To listen for the hidden meanings of the text of the research community is carried out by questioning its 'otherness' and allowing it to assert itself. Fidelity to the mode of questioning is the authentic response of the researcher who is called to listen to the speaking of text.

The Pedagogical Stance in Hermeneutic Phenomenological Research

Husserl's (1907/1999) work, along with the work of Heidegger (1927/1993a) and Gadamer (1960/1999), constitute the basic foundation of the methodological framework for van Manen's (2003) hermeneutic phenomenological method, which he describes as a "dynamic interplay among six research activities:

1. Turning to a phenomenon that seriously interests us and commits us to the world.
2. Investigating experience as we live it rather than as we conceptualize it;
3. Reflecting on the essential themes which characterize the phenomenon;
4. Describing the phenomenon through the art of writing and rewriting;
5. Maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon;
6. Balancing the research context by considering parts and whole." (pp. 30-31)

With the exception of van Manen's explicit educational stance (#5), each of the research activities can be traced to Husserl's science of phenomenological knowing:

It is now possible to take such pure phenomena as objects for research...And thus we drop anchor on the shore of phenomenology whose objects are posited as existing...as entities absolutely given and grasped in pre immanent seeing...I mean precisely not what it refers to beyond itself, but rather what it is in itself and what it is given as. (pp. 34-35)

Turning to the Phenomenon that Commits Me to the World

Distance education commits me to the world as a distance educator since 1982. Although I was not educated with geographical separation from my own teachers, I discovered even before 1982 that many people who need education do not receive it. My own education is only one of many ways to become educated, I learned. I questioned whether my way was the most stimulating, inspiring, or pleasurable way to be educated. What I did uncover as an educator of distance was a longstanding prejudice against education that bypassed the traditional system I knew.

As a teacher of nontraditional education, I share in the marginalization of the nontraditional learner. Charles Wedemeyer (1981) writes prophetically about questions that nontraditional education raise for the educator:

If learning occurs outside the environment of the school, and does not always occur within it, then we must question the assumption (a given in our culture) that specified place, time, and environmental conditions are essential for learning. If learning can and does occur anywhere, any time, under apparently random environmental conditions, then perhaps some of the effort we put into creating special environments for learning may not be necessary. (p. 29)

Deviations from face-to-face presence in a classroom raise eyebrows and invite questions whose answers challenge me to understand presence in distance.

Investigating the Lived Experience of Presence in Distance

Distance education helped me to clarify distinctions between content and delivery of education. Distance is about delivery, but delivery influences content. As a distance educator in 1983, I met adults who were highly self-disciplined and preferred to learn independently. I wonder if the content of Catholic teaching, Sacred Scripture, and the rich patrimony of theological and spiritual writings of the Catholic Church can be delivered in correspondence courses without a human face. Will other adults be transformed as I was transformed in face-to-face classes? I continue to discover that the human person is transformed by text. This is the phenomenon that calls to me.

Wedemeyer (1981) links it to the learner:

The learner takes with him the essential environment for learning wherever, whenever he learns. In the unique way of every learner, he provides his own continuing environment in response to changing times, places, and situations. In fact, the learner and his surround are the basic environment for learning. Put the other way around, learning is a phenomenon that occurs only where the learner is. (p. 30)

In 2000 my keyboard introduced one hundred catechists who were contemplating the face of Christ in a network called the World Wide Web. I discovered something remarkable about text, technology, and spiritual transformation. Distance education reveals how distance becomes presence in computer-mediated technology. It reveals individual learners who become a living community through dialogue that surpasses class discussion. The ability to become present in text to contemplate the face of Christ through a connection to the Internet—this is the lived experience that calls me to Husserl’s ideal of *pure seeing* as a researcher.

Reflecting on Essential Themes

In Chapter Two I have explored emerging themes and reflected on literature that offers insights into these themes. I have reflected on the meaning of being embodied in technology and disembodied in presence. I have heeded the warnings of Catholic theologians who are wary of disembodiment and question the meaning of community called virtual. I have examined human emotions that emerge through electronically-generated text. I have examined research studies that isolate and define types of human presence online and their effect on learning outcomes, learner persistence, and learner satisfaction from a quantitative and qualitative perspective. Yet, I am called to describe the silence that still waits to be heard in the language of the online learning community by creating text that responds to their call as a dialogue of presence in distance.

As a distance educator and catechist, human presence in distance is an essential theme and core value. As I reflect historically on the use of various technologies to deliver education from the letters of St. Paul in the first century to the online learning community in the twenty-first century, physical presence becomes one of many dimensions of human presence that emerges in the learning process. The word of God addresses us in Sacred Scripture that mysteriously contains his divine presence; we make ourselves humanly present to one another in our own text. Pope Benedict XVI

(2007a) writes about the link between word and reality in Sacred Scripture and how over time the language of Scripture unfolds more and more of the divine reality in human language:

The Church's remembering is not merely a private affair; it transcends the sphere of our own human understanding and knowing. It is a being led by the Holy Spirit who shows us the connectedness of Scripture, the connection between word and reality, and, in doing that, leads us into all truth... (p. 234)

The essence of being Catholic is a belief in presence—that Jesus Christ as God and man is fully present sacramentally in the consecrated unleavened bread; this belief is called presence—the *Real Presence*.

Another major theme which calls me to further research is the meaning, essence, and formation of community online. How does a virtual community support adult faith formation? What are the bonds of a virtual community? What is the extent of the commitment by the members of a virtual learning community? What are the implications of a human community without visible bodies? What is the significance of place in computer-mediated learning where I am at home and in cyberspace at the same time? In what way does time influence communal bonds in a virtual community? I have examined poetry that addresses presence in various ways to help me understand more deeply the significance of the lived experience of presence and absence in text. What is the essence of human presence without the body, I ask the poets? What is the meaning of time and place for members of a virtual community? What does the natural world reveal about supernatural presence?

Writing and Rewriting my Way through Written Text

Researching lived experience through the art of writing and rewriting is a doubly reflective process. As a researcher of presence in distance, I am researching presence through the lived experience of text projected electronically on my computer screen and

responding to the projected text by writing and rewriting my own text that projects my presence in distance. This doubly reflective process leads through language with language to become present to deeper, more elusive understandings about the meaning of human presence. The mysterious, hermeneutical play of interpreting written text and the creative human activity of writing text have been a call to me since childhood, offering a path to encounter life in ways that are unpredictable and demanding, perhaps as meandering and transient as my own early life in the military. The struggle to find meaning through text yields secrets of identity and community. As van Manen (2003) notes, “It all seems absurd until we begin to discern the silence in the writing—the cultivation of one’s being...” (p. 8). The space that opens in language is a call to encounter both the mystery of God and the mystery within. I am at home in research that reveals its truth by writing and rewriting text.

Maintaining the Pedagogical Stance

Van Manen (2003) calls for a fifth research activity that makes his methodological framework distinctive in phenomenology: maintaining a strong and oriented pedagogical relation to the phenomenon. He calls for the researcher who exercises Husserl’s concept of pure seeing to see with the eyes of a teacher and the eyes of a learner. The pedagogical relation of teacher and learner is a commitment to relationship. In the theorizing of Dr. Michael Moore, (1972/2007a), teacher and learner commit themselves to a personal transaction to produce learning. For me the personal transaction is prior and preeminent. For me, such a transaction or relationship must respect the dignity of both teacher and learner as human persons according to the philosophical understanding of John Paul II. The pedagogical orientation is a response to the natural human thirst for truth and love. The pedagogical relationship is marked by trust and care. Its ground must be ethical.

The Christian understanding of the relationship between God and man is pedagogical. God is Father and Teacher. Man is child—daughter or son—and learner in a pedagogical relationship that is familial and founded on unconditional love. As a researcher and educator of presence in distance, I am fundamentally a catechist because I am a Christian. As a catechist, I have a pedagogical orientation toward everyone and to the world. I am called to make God present where I am present—present in distance. I teach my presence as a way to encounter God, as my presence has been transformed by divine presence. I am called as catechist to question the lived experience of God's presence in technology, in the computer-mediated community. Heidegger challenges me to uncover the essence of technology as revealing truth and care in the power of electronically projected language as teacher and learner. My identity as catechist forms me ontologically as teacher and learner of divine and human presence—presence in distance. My vision that seeks to see with the eyes of the phenomenologist is pedagogical. My being is pedagogical.

Balancing Parts and Whole

The sixth dimension of van Manen's (2003) framework for research calls for balancing the research context by considering parts and whole. What is the research context of presence in distance? The online learning community that contemplates the face of Christ at CDU is comprised of learners drawn from anywhere in the world where there is a connection to the Internet and an ability to communicate in English. Each learner is a world, a context, and a perspective. Yet, each learner chooses to become a member of a community that reflects the richness of each person's gift of self and demands from each member service to the community. Individual stories are balanced against the whole fabric of the community sustained by the Internet.

Themes become a weaving of parts and whole. The lived experience of presence in the online learning community is woven from the lived experience of technology,

text, time, disembodiment, home, and place as cyberspace. Each member of the online community contributes a perspective on these themes and reflects on them as a member of a community in textual dialogue seeking deeper meanings as a whole. The projection of self and the formation of community in text is a dynamic unchoreographed drama played out in abstract markings of language that bring together parts and whole. Etymological renderings recall layers of meaning that have been covered over by the passage of time. These historical and cultural renderings record past moments of meaning in language that bring the past into the present and enrich the whole presence of now. The researcher of language is called to balance past and present, part and whole. Attentiveness to the call of the question—*What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?*—assures this balance.

The Research Design of the Investigation

Van Manen (2003) calls the human science researcher to text: “To do research, to theorize, is to be involved in the consideration of text, the meaning of dialogic textuality and its promise for pedagogy” (p. 151). As researcher, my response to the call of my question is an invitation (See Appendix A) to textual conversation in the online community that comes together to contemplate the face of Christ at The Catholic Distance University. The invitation is posted in the online campus of CDU. I welcome ten participants for the research study, even though I plan for six to eight participants. I am pleased by the interest in the topic and the gender distribution that the larger number offers. The larger number also protects against possible withdrawals.

Participants are selected among the graduate and undergraduate students in theology programs (See Appendix A) and all but one are working toward a degree, as my research considers the role of time on the formation of community. I ask participants to have a minimum of two to three years as adult learners and members of

the online community. Confidentiality is assured in the final results of the research through the offer of pseudonyms.

Although students of all faith traditions are welcome at CDU, I limit participants to those in the Catholic tradition to be able to make assumptions about theological understanding in language and tradition. I seek a balance of genders and geographical distribution and a time commitment of eight weeks.

Although I limited the research community to six to eight participants, ten volunteers asked to participate. I agreed to allow all ten to participate because I wanted greater diversity. They are introduced in depth in Chapter Four. Although all ten are native English speakers, one lives in Germany married to a native German, and is fluent in three languages. Two of the participants are Canadian, three are male. Of the Americans, two live in California, two in Ohio, one in Texas, one in New York State, one in Virginia. I also anticipated that volunteers might have to drop out, and having a larger group would not adversely affect the results. No one dropped out.

My interaction as researcher involves in-depth conversation with each participant through an introductory questionnaire (See Appendix C) sent to each participant via email before we begin our group conversations, to solicit information about each participant's background and to establish rapport. Secure access is given only to those who have been selected and freely agree to participate as documented by a signed written participant agreement form, a sample of which is found in Appendix B. The participants are invited to meet in a password protected online research center for the duration of the study with access limited to participants, known in phenomenological research as co-researchers, with the researcher.

Conversations are elicited weekly from questions I pose to the group that derive from my general research question (See Appendix B). During the first week, I am asked to create a special online Chapel for the use of the research group only. I have this new space created within the secure online research center. At the end of each week I post a

summary of our conversations for their review and comment. Some of the topics and questions I pose to participants include the following:

Topic: Technology

1. What is your background with computers and technology in general?
2. Describe your feelings about logging into a computer to be present to your classmates and faculty?
3. Describe your feelings toward technology.

Topic: Time and Place

4. Describe the effect of asynchronous time on your experience of studying theology. What are the advantageous and disadvantages of synchronous time versus asynchronous time.
5. What is your lived experience of place in cyberspace? How does working at home contribute to your behavior, your study, and your feelings about yourself?

Topic: Text and Presence

6. How do you make yourself present in text?
7. Describe your relationship to text. Describe your relationship to writing.
8. How does the technology enhance or detract from your being present online? For example, how does the ability to edit your comments contribute to presence?

Topic: Presence

9. Describe how you are present in the various areas of the online campus at CDU.
10. Compare being present face-to-face with being present online.
11. What advice would you give faculty for enhancing presence in the online class?

Topic: Community

12. In what ways is the online community a faith community?
13. How is the online learning community similar or different from other communities to which you belong?
14. Describe the impact of membership in a global community.

Topic: Seeking the face of Christ

15. Describe aspects of the online learning experience that enable you to seek the face of Christ.

16. Compare your experience of seeking the face of Christ online to the Apostles' seeking of Christ in first-century Palestine.
17. Describe aspects of the online experience that may not contribute to seeking the face of Christ.

Topic: Contemplating the face of Christ

18. Reflect and discuss the ways that God is present to you online.
19. What does the dynamic of presence and absence reveal about contemplating the face of Christ online?

Topic: Online/Offline – How does each support the other?

20. To what degree are you willing to support the other members of the online learning community if needed?
21. Describe the bonds you have forged in the online learning community.
22. How does the online learning community strengthen and influence your membership in traditional face-to-face communities? How do traditional communities to which you belong support the online learning community?

Four additional unplanned threaded discussions emerge from the eight week discussions. These new threads include the following: a) My CDU Self; b) Reveal or Project? c) Paper versus Online; and d) Post-research discussion. All conversations are posted as text in the discussion areas of the research center and can be downloaded and printed.

As part of the rendering and reflecting process, I print the conversations and assemble them in a binder to enable a deeper and more thoughtful reflection. I question the language and seek to reveal themes that emerge through my own writing in response to the conversations, keeping in mind van Manen's six research activities, especially the need to consider parts and whole within the research context.

Themes are returned to the participants to ensure the accuracy, as well as new possibilities, of the researcher's textual interpretations and understanding imbedded in language that is both explicit and implicit in spaces of silence and conversational activity. The return of themes to participants stimulates further discussion and deeper reflection in the movement between parts and whole that include additional

etymological renderings and literary and philosophical contributions. Van Manen (2003) emphasizes the need for depth:

Depth is what gives the phenomenon or lived experience to which we orient ourselves its meaning and its resistance to our fuller understanding...Rich descriptions that explore the meaning structures beyond what is immediately experienced, gain a dimension of depth. Research and theorizing that simplifies life, without reminding us of its fundamental ambiguity and mystery, thereby distorts and shallows-out life, failing to reveal its depthful character and contours. (pp. 152-153)

As researcher, my essential activity is carried out through the writing and re-writing of text in response to text addressed to me and to the community of participants by the participants, including myself. Other questions embedded in the original question may show themselves. The movement of the research process using van Manen's framework is an indistinguishable movement between researcher and research subject, and a blending of identities of participants' from research subjects to co-researchers.

The thematizing process is carried out in Chapters Four and Five. Van Manen (2003) recommends three approaches to uncovering thematic aspects to the phenomenon: a) *wholistic reading approach* where the researcher attends to the text as a whole, seeking to understand the significance of the text as a whole; b) *selective or highlighting approach* where we listen to or read a text several times and ask "What statement(s) or phrase (s) seem particularly essential or revealing about the phenomenon?" These statements are highlighted, circled, or underlined; c) *the detailed or line by line approach* where we look at every single sentence or sentence cluster and ask, "What does this sentence or sentence cluster reveal about the phenomenon?" (pp. 92-93). The study of lived experience descriptions reveals emerging themes that appear to share commonality. The task of the researcher is to hold onto these themes by lifting appropriate phrases and singular statements. Chapter Six addresses the pedagogical

significance of the research, ethical implications that may be revealed and further questions that call for research beyond the scope of this study.

The pathways of this research method begin in Chapter One with an exploration of the call and demands of the question of *Presence in Distance: What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?* The initial outlines and basic structure of the question are progressively opened by textual reflections of the researcher on her own lived experience as a distance educator; reflections on personal biography are sought to illuminate the phenomenon further and illuminate the researcher's pre-understandings.

In Chapter Two, the emerging themes of technology, presence, and community are explored in more depth by reviewing current research, reflecting on online conversational narratives, literary contributions, metaphor, and the hermeneutical phenomenological textual responses of the researcher.

In Chapter Three philosophical understandings that ground the research question and the research method are explored and interpreted, always in response to the call of the question. Chapter Three concludes with a research design that emerges from the integrity of the original question. Van Manen (2003) writes, "A phenomenological question must not only be made clear, understood, but also lived by the researcher" (p. 44). Heidegger (1953/1993c) challenges me as a researcher to be true to the call of the question: "Questioning is the piety of thought" (p. 341). Rilke (1907/2000), in a letter to an aspiring poet, emphasizes the role of lived experience in creative work: "Do not now look for the answers. They cannot be given to you because you could not live them. It is a question of experiencing everything. At present, you need to live the question" (p. 35).

Chapter Four begins as my plane touches down at the Rome Airport in September 2007. I have made arrangements to meet with two Americans at the Vatican whose work directly involves computer-mediated communication: Sister Judith

Zoebelein, FSE, a Franciscan sister who runs the Vatican Office of the Internet, and Cardinal John Foley, recent past president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. The conversations at the Vatican set the context for the beginning of my interpretive work of thematizing in Chapter Four and through these relationships with Americans, I was able to meet two other staff members of the Pontifical Council and the new president, Archbishop Celli. Returning to Rome at the conclusion of eight weeks of conversations with the online research community opens my understanding of the phenomenon to the wider community of the universal Church; my presence in Rome acknowledges the unique structure of truth and authority vested in the wider community of the Church that delineates the identity of the particular community called by the research question and lived out in a community whose identity is a calling by Christ in the name of the Church. Van Manen (2003) describes the research process as a balancing of parts and whole that includes the setting of context: “In conceiving and planning a human science research study, the context needs to be articulated since context places certain limitations on the general applicability and acceptability of methodological procedures” (p. 163).

My interviews at the Vatican also reflect the meaning of community in the Catholic Church, as Christ first called his Apostles whose successors are the Pope and the Bishops. The teaching authority of the Church resides in the Hierarchy of bishops in union with the Pope, and delegated to those who work with them at the Vatican. To live the fullness of community in the Church as communion, as *communio*, all particular communities receive their identity from the community of Christ and the Apostles and their successors.

The generosity of those who met with me enlightened my understanding about the attitudes, hopes, and accomplishments of the Church in the field of communications technology and opened my interpretive renderings with a clearer understanding of how our particular journey fit within the context of the universal Church community. The

universal and the particular actually met in the lived experience of one member of the research community who traveled to St. Peter's Basilica in Rome during our online research; her transformative experience attending a Mass at St. Peter's Basilica in August set the stage for my upcoming journey in September that attended to her particular journey in my own attendance at a similar Mass at St. Peter's Basilica. Our lived experience coincided at the high altar of St. Peter.

Chapters Four and Five render the richness of the meaning of living the hermeneutic phenomenological question of *Presence in Distance: The Lived Experience of Adult Faith Formation in an Online Learning Community*. Chapter Six explores pedagogical implications for the field of distance education and the transformative journey of the researcher. The call of the question in this research investigation reveals other questions and other paths beyond the scope of this journey that continue to invite reflection and response from the wider research community.

CHAPTER FOUR:

PRESENCE IN DISTANCE: THE COMMUNITY EXPLORES THE PHENOMENON

The Word became flesh and dwelt amongst us and then we see that the whole of the vision of Jesus is bringing people together.
(Vanier, 2006, pp. 27-28)

...to exist is to co-exist.
(Marcel, 1937/1951/1967, p. 205)

The deepest nature of the soul is relationship.
(O'Donohue, 1999, p. xxiii)

As my plane touches down at *Leonardo Da Vinci* Airport in Rome in late September 2007, I carry with me the weightless companionship of ten personalities—adult learners spread throughout the globe who have volunteered to join me in researching the lived experience of presence in distance—adult faith formation in text projected through computer-mediated communication. What is the essence of the experience of growing spiritually through text alone? What kind of community do we form without the presence of our bodies? What do our textual reflections reveal about who we are as human persons? What have we learned about seeking the face of Christ through technology that we want to share with the Church and the world of the new millennium?

Face-to-face with the Face of the Church

As the online conversations in the research community draw to a close, I begin another stage of the research process that calls me to travel to Rome to make myself present to Church leaders who make Christ present today through communications technology. As a catechist of presence in distance, I seek the face of Christ through the

voices of those who guide the Church in the new millennium. I, too, am a pilgrim making my way to the source of my call to better understand in face-to-face conversations with those called to authenticate the truth of what we proclaim: the meaning of presence in distance for those who seek the face of Christ through computer-mediated communication. How will the Church's mission of evangelization call new missionaries to make Christ present in cyberspace, I wonder?

The wonderings and wanderings of the research community—our unity in mind and spirit—accompany me this warm September night as I deplane, thinking that I would like to bring my research community with me to St. Peter's Basilica to be welcomed by the translucent arms of Bernini's baroque colonnade that symbolize the embrace of God. How will text projected from a laptop computer capture the majesty of Michelangelo's illuminated dome that dominates the Roman sky tonight, I wonder. How will fingers dancing on a keyboard testify to the presence of a fisherman called Peter whose bones dwell in a Renaissance Basilica called home to Catholics? What is the power of words caught in a net and cast into cyberspace?

I recall the text of Max van Manen (2003) on the essential relationship between human science research and writing: "...human science research is a form of writing. Creating a phenomenological text is the object of the research process" (p. 111). Van Manen describes the complexity of writing that lets the invisible be seen:

The words are not the thing. And yet, it is to our words, language, that we must apply all our phenomenological skill and talents, because it is in and through the words that the shining through (the invisible) becomes visible. (p. 130)

Will my words communicate the comforting presence of a *papa* who does not speak my language but whose words speak to each of us in our own language? Will my text reveal the comfort of home in a place whose language, sounds, and scale humble my stature but welcome me into its mystery?

As I deplane, the rich, voluptuous sounds of the Italian language jog my long term memory for Italian expressions that will guide my footsteps from the runway to the platform of the train in the airport that will take me to the train station in Rome, and from the train station by taxi to my hotel near the Vatican.

Exploring the Mind of the Church

What impels the researcher of presence in distance to travel between continents to search the minds and faces of leaders at the Vatican, in face-to-face interviews for four days? What do I seek as I listen to men and women who carry the future of the Roman Catholic Church hidden in their words and gestures? What do they teach me about contemplating the face of Christ through computer-mediated communication? Do I hear the encouragement of Christ in the words of these shepherds? How do I make present their faces to a community whose faces are only present to me in text?

John Paul II (2004) describes the call of a bishop as a call to leave what is familiar to labor in fields of the unfamiliar; this is the call of every person who lives out the mystery of human freedom and faith in God:

Beginning with Abraham, the faith of each of his sons represents a constant leaving behind of what is cherished, familiar, and personal, in order to open up to the unknown, trusting in the truth we share and the common future we all have in God. We are all invited to participate in this process of leaving behind the well-known, the familiar. (p. 213)

O'Donohue (1999) describes the wanderer as one "who gives priority to the duties of longing over belonging" (p. 45). Traveling alone to Rome for the next few days is both a longing and a belonging. This is a journey with the unfamiliar, the unknown, as only two faces I meet at the Vatican are familiar, but I am accompanied by the belonging of the online research community who overcome my distance with their technologically-mediated presence.

Familiar Faces

My first day I interview the two familiar faces of Americans who work in the Vatican—Sister Judith Zobelein, FSE, in the Office of the Internet and Cardinal John P. Foley, recent former President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications and now Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulchre. Sister Judith is known by many in the business world as she is featured in *Business Week Magazine* as the face of the Vatican website. I know her from her launch of an online course for participants at World Youth Day in Cologne, Germany in 2005, a project for which I contributed an educational framework to her breathtaking graphics and sound.

Cardinal Foley, a 72 year-old American prelate with a doctorate in philosophy and a master's in journalism from Columbia University, was Editor of the Philadelphia *Catholic Standard and Times* and co-host of radio and television productions when he was called to Rome in 1984 as President of the Pontifical Commission (now the Pontifical Council) for Social Communications. His replacement, Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, is a 66 year-old Italian prelate from Rimini who has spent most of his ecclesiastical career as a diplomat.

Reflecting on my two interviews, I am reminded of the document of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications published in the United States by the US Catholic Conference of the American Bishops entitled *Communications: A Pastoral Instruction on the Media, Public Opinion, and Human Progress*. It acknowledges the significant contributions of Americans to the Church's understanding of social communications:

From the inception of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications (1964), Americans have played an important role in this body, as members and consultants. American bishops and American communications specialists were intimately involved in the exhaustive work that went into the composition of the Instruction. Even more important, perhaps, the theory and practice of American communications media—concepts such as the importance of public opinion, the

right of the public to be informed, the constructive and indeed essential role of media in the life of modern society—have clearly had an impact in the formulation of this document. The Instruction as it now stands would not have been possible without the proving ground provided by the American experience in communications.

(1971b, p. vii)

These remarks of Bishop John May pre-date the Internet and computer-mediated communication in education. I hope my interviews this brisk morning reveal a vision from the Church that mirrors my own passion for education and *catechesis* through technology.

The Past President

Cardinal John P. Foley's assistant uses email for appointments and graciously escorts me to an elegantly appointed room with high ceilings and oriental rugs in an ancient building on a tiny side street off bustling *Via della Conciliazione*, a twentieth century avenue lined with stores, cafes, tour buses, and ecclesiastical offices leading from St. Peter's Basilica to the *Castel Sant'Angelo*; it was constructed to mark the Lateran Treaty of 1929 that guaranteed the sovereignty of the Vatican from Italy.

As former President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Cardinal Foley's conversation is retrospective. His first recollection is John Paul II's (2005) last official document, entitled *Rapid Development*, published two months before his death to celebrate the 40th Anniversary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Cardinal Foley believes this was providential for the ways that technology continues to transform the world today.

The Cardinal reminds me of the unique Vatican domain address for the Vatican website that he secured to guarantee the authenticity of Vatican website's content. The website's domain address is *.va* not *.it*.

He looks with pride at the information network used by nineteen of the twenty-two dioceses in Latin America. The network called RIIAL, (*Red Informatica de la Iglesia en America Latina*—Information Network of the Church in Latin America), uses computers, video, radio, and print technologies. It is managed by Dr. Leticia Soberón of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Cardinal Foley explains that Cardinal Hoyos of Columbia who created RIIAL was a pioneer computer user back in the 1980's.

Cardinal Foley prefers books to computers, but states without hesitation that both are universally valid and needed. When I tout the advantages of technology for lifelong learning he counters that technology involves continual adaptation to newer technologies, which is difficult as we age. I wonder if he is speaking autobiographically. He reminds me of the documents his office has published on the use of the Internet and the values of communicators to serve the truth, the dignity of the human person, and the common good. He believes that the cost of technology will continue to drop, and acknowledges that distance education is more cost-effective, as if that were its singular advantage, but he believes it cannot take the place of face-to-face presence and nonverbal communication, especially for those who are entering the Church. Deregulation of the media in the United States has been a disaster for the Church, he tells me, because it practically eliminates Catholic programming on major networks. He stresses the importance of honesty and candor for the Church in public relations and the need for approval by a local bishop for publishing a newspaper column or a TV or radio program that deals with ecclesiastical issues.

The Office of the Internet

With a natural break in conversation and conscious of his time, I thank Cardinal Foley and depart his elegant quarters. I turn the corner once again onto *Via della Conciliazione* and continue to walk several blocks toward *Castel Sant'Angelo*, walking away from St. Peter's Basilica to Sister Judith's office in the last building on the right of

the hectic boulevard. Sister is an energetic American sister who is as fluent and relaxed with technology as she is in speaking Italian; she wears a brown Franciscan habit. As she asks me to summarize my conversation with Cardinal Foley, she picks up the phone on her desk and calls another American working as an Administrative Assistant in the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Mr. Thaddeus Jones, nicknamed TJ. Within minutes I have an appointment with him and the promise of meeting with the director of RIAL, Dr. Leticia Soberón. TJ offers to call Archbishop Celli, Cardinal Foley's successor. Within a few minutes the phone rings again, and this time it is Archbishop Celli himself, inviting Sister Judith and me to meet with him on Monday morning. Sister Judith declines but assures him that I would be delighted.

Sister is busy but reviews the features of the Vatican website: the weekly *Osservatore Romano* newspaper, the Vatican press office, Vatican Radio, streaming audio and video, and a section on Vatican publications. She suspects that the Church is reluctant to introduce interactivity on the site, but she believes that the next stage of communications technology for young people is using the Internet for social networking personally and professionally. She believes young people are saturated with the sensual and need highly attractive, visually rich imagery to be attracted to religious sites. Sister Judith emails me an article on *Second Life* entitled *Second Life: The Desire for Another Life*, by a Jesuit theologian, Antonio Spadaro, S.J. (2007). He notes that the Church's presence is missing from *Second Life*. The article is written in Italian and has not yet been translated. I thank Sister Judith and depart.

The Pontifical Council for Social Communications

With a weekend break, I return to the Vatican to engage in three more interviews and conversations with staff of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, whose responsibility is the use of communications media to make the Church present in the world today. My morning begins with excitement and trepidation as I reflect on

new faces behind walls that lead me inside the home of the Church but take me to places unknown, to meet with people who may not speak my language.

Negotiating security inside the Vatican includes passing through the Swiss Guard Station at a main gate to the left of St. Peter's Basilica, visiting the recently constructed security station that requires the deposit of a passport or photo ID, a phone call to the office of the visitor's destination, and the wearing of a Visitor's Pass. Walking inside the Vatican walls is exhilarating. In a few minutes persons whose names until now have only been abstract symbols in online Vatican news bulletins will become real people whose work may enlighten my own research interests. I am not alone.

TJ and Leticia. TJ welcomes me to his high-ceilinged, corner office that echoes slightly from the lack of rugs and sparse furniture. He is a graduate of Notre Dame University, fluent in Italian, and at ease with computers. He helps out with IT at a local American school in Rome and is a strong proponent of distance education and technology in general. He suggests that I meet Dr. Soberón to learn more about RIIAL, as soon as she is off the phone.

I am escorted into her large office and sit with her and TJ in a sitting area where we begin immediately to converse. Dr. Leticia Soberón is young, attractive, enthusiastic, self-deprecating, and radiates a love for the Church. She is Mexican by nationality and speaks very good English. An hour slips by unnoticed, and TJ returns to his office. She talks to me about the spirit of RIIAL with animation; I respond with excitement communicated through the intensity of my listening as I hear about themes that touch my own research interests.

RIIAL is the digital network of the Church in Latin America begun by the National Bishops' Conference in Bogotá, Columbia in 1987. Leticia describes the essence of RIIAL as more than a communications network. It is a real theological phenomenon, the spirit of a networked culture, and is characterized by solidarity, sharing, community, communication, and communion. It is a deeper phenomenon than

the technology that builds it, as it creates a spirit of sharing. RIIAL provides access to the information society, especially to poor, isolated, rural parishes and communities throughout Latin America. The network provides services such as papal documents, parish administration software, a weekly newsletter, free servers for website development, assistance in creating websites, databases, introductory courses for priests on using computers, and a Catechetical Center with online courses and training. Leticia explains that the digital culture is much more than technology; it requires a correct understanding of the human person, and the light of the Gospel. “We must surrender our fear of computers,” she tells me, “and learn how they transform our lives and open a way to understanding the world today. RIIAL,” she says, “is an *ecclesial net*...the Church in action in this new culture.” In her words, “...working together as a network, you open a place of encounter where institutions and faithful participate, each one according to his own reality and nature, sharing the presence of the Lord in their midst, each sharing his or her own richness” (2007, pp. 1-5). She uses the metaphor of a wedding feast to describe this richness. Her description mirrors my own language in describing the richness of dialogue in the online learning community at CDU. She and I discuss collaboration—how CDU’s academic programs could benefit RIIAL, and how RIIAL’s programs could be used for Spanish-speaking Catholic communities in the United States that CDU serves. We agree to keep in touch. Leticia has shown me how the Church is using the power of the digital culture to reach out in service to those who are powerless and most in need. Archbishop Celli, (2007) her superior, calls this a response to “info-poverty” (November 21, par. 17).

The New President. Archbishop Celli greets me punctually at ten o’clock Monday morning in a reception area at the other end of the building from TJ and Leticia. As the new President, his remarks look ahead as he confidently shares his vision for the future of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. In response to my dissertation interests, he offers the assistance of his staff.

He informs me that the topic of the next Universal Synod of Bishops in October will be a reflection on the word of God in the Church; communications media plays a very important role, he thinks, in proclaiming the word of God in our time and culture and must be part of the deliberations of the Synod. He describes the Internet as a forest—we are surrounded by information, but people are searching for meaning. In his words, this is a delicate moment for the Church. The heart searches for meaning. The Church needs to learn how to lead people from a search for truth to Jesus Christ who is the Truth. Information is necessary but what really matters to people is the meaning of life. He describes the inner life of the Church and its members as communion, with God and with one another; communion is a gift from God given by the Holy Spirit, a reminder of my own etymological discoveries in the search for the depths of the meaning of communication as the giving and receiving of love.

His concluding remarks move to the needs of Africa and how technology must help. He compares RIIAL to Africa and the challenge in Africa of multiple languages and lack of resources. “We must attend to Africa,” he says. At the end of thirty minutes, without glancing at his watch, he rises and departs. My interviews have ended, and I leave Rome the following day.

The Good Shepherd

The meaning of my journey to Rome during the last four days is explained in John Paul II’s (2004) deeply personal memoir entitled *Rise, Let Us Be On Our Way*. He describes the image of the Good Shepherd as an icon of *catechesis*. John Paul II presents the work of *catechesis* as the fulfilling of a command of Christ at the end of St. Matthew’s Gospel, “Go and make disciples of all nations” (Mt. 28:19-20). He uses the logo of the new *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994), the image of the Good Shepherd from a third century Christian tombstone in the catacombs of *Domitilla*, to explain the Church’s understanding of *catechesis*. The authority to carry out this command to teach is rooted

in Christ. As a bishop and later as the Pope, whose official title is *Bishop of Rome*, John Paul II describes *catechesis* as a process of love and responsibility: “*Catechesis* gives priority to the human person and to personal encounter through signs and symbols of faith. *Catechesis* is always love and responsibility, a responsibility born of love for those whom we meet on our journey” (p. 106). I wonder as he writes these words if he thinks about the journey as a digital crossing of the threshold of the Internet.

The Good Shepherd leads and protects by his authority as symbolized in the shepherd’s staff. CDU, as a university that educates catechists at all levels, promotes its fidelity to Christ through its loyalty to the Church. As a researcher of presence in distance, I embark on my journey with hope to receive the presence of Christ in gifts of knowledge and love from the Church who delegates her authority to me to speak of God in the tongues and technologies of contemporary culture. John Paul II describes the Good Shepherd as he “...who has concern for every sheep, a concern filled with the patience needed to reach every individual in a truly personal way” (p. 107). I marvel how the online learning community today reaches to the ends of the earth simply through a connection to the Internet. Dr. Cathy, a member of our research community, tells us, “This thought of the global impact of the CDU community sends chills down my spine. Christ’s command to make disciples of all nations is being fulfilled, and I am grateful to be part of this awesome experience!”

The Gifts

What are the gifts that the Church bestows on me as a researcher of presence in distance? RIAL teaches me the primacy of love that ensures those who are materially poor will also share in the benefits of knowledge and education delivered so effectively through computer networks. How has the prerequisite for students at CDU to be equipped with a personal computer connected to the Internet defined the make-up of the CDU community, I wonder. Who would we be as a community if the primacy of

love influenced the use of our resources? If a computer connected to the Internet was not merely a student's responsibility? What is the hidden meaning in Archbishop Celli's call as a shepherd of social communications to turn our glance to the needs of Africa? How does CDU reflect on its resources in light of the needs of the Church and the world?

Dr. Leticia Soberón teaches me to expand my vision of network from a computer network that, for me, makes distance present, to a wider communications network that incorporates many forms of communication including print, television, computers, and face-to-face encounters so that the network becomes an instrument for communion on many levels. RIIAL (2007) "...makes a synthesis of the Gospel, the human person, and technology...to create a culture of solidarity" (Soberón, p. 3). Leticia tells me, "The famous digital culture is strongly connected with technology, but it is much more than technology" (Soberón, p. 3). Heidegger (1953/1993c), in his essay on technology, defines this deeper dimension: "Technology is therefore no mere means. Technology is a way of revealing. If we give heed to this, then another whole realm...will open itself up to us. It is the realm of revealing, i.e., of truth" (p. 318).

The Community

Some hidden power assures me, I repeat, that if the others do not exist,
neither do I.

(Marcel, 1937/1951/1967, p. 26)

Presence to each other is the door to all belonging.

(O'Donohue, 1999, p. 60)

The invitation (See Appendix A) for volunteers to participate in my research is the word that is posted—nailed to the invisible walls of the CDU online campus, a place in cyberspace formed by the invisible threads of a net called the Internet. The word is an invitation that calls forth a human response to text. The members of the online campus

are adult learners invited to become part of a new community for eight weeks...invited to form a community of persons from the willingness to reflect on the meaning of the lived experience of contemplating the face of Christ through computer-mediated technology, the phenomenon of presence in distance.

Casting the Net

The research design cautiously calls for six persons, but ten generously step forward. I welcome all ten because I believe the conversations will reflect more diversity in geography, age, gender, and experience. The net is thrown and, once again in response to the silent reverberation of the command of Christ to “Put out into the deep,” the net reaches far and wide—from Nova Scotia to Germany, from the Panhandle of Texas to the foothills of the Catskill Mountains. It stretches its invisible threads from north to south, from Ohio to Virginia and west to California by way of Kansas. The word we speak is English; the nationalities who speak it are American and Canadian. One of two Canadians is married to a native German and is fluent in German because she has lived in Germany for twenty-five years.

The Call and Response

The net is rich. It holds a preponderance of lay members of the Catholic Church living in the world and one member of the clergy, an ordained permanent deacon who is a computer software developer by profession and married to a medical doctor. The US Military is present through the participation of an Army Air National Guard helicopter pilot and through the professional work of the Canadian in Germany who serves the US Military community near Frankfurt.

The richness of the new research community reveals a chronically ill physician, the wife of a college professor, a former farmer turned college instructor, two parish religious education directors, a self-identified computer geek and programmer, a state

tax processor married to a retired IBM software engineer, and the wife of a California grape grower. Three men are surrounded by eight women, when I include myself. Two participants are adult converts to the Catholic faith, two are enrolled in the BA program, seven are enrolled in the MA program, and one participant is just taking graduate courses. Eight participants are married, one of whom met her spouse online, one participant is separated, one is single and, when I include myself, one is widowed.

The Net is Rich: Presenting the Research Participants

Duc in altum. Peter and his first companions trusted Christ's words and cast the nets. "When they had done this, they caught a great number of fish" (Luke 5:6).

(John Paul II, 2001, p. 7)

The unity of the Church is not uniformity, but an organic blending of legitimate diversities.

(John Paul II, 2001, p. 60)

The research community woven with invisible threads through technology and personal commitment, has caught the identity of the Catholic Church—its universality and diversity. I am reminded of the words of Dr. Leticia Soberón (2007): "The Church is multiple and has many and diverse ways of expression, but only one and the same message to give to the world" (p. 4). The thread that catches this diversity of strangers who become an online research community is the face of Christ revealed through text on computer screens.

I present the members of the research community by their geographical identities, as symbolic of the worldwide reach of an online learning community. They choose to retain their personal identities in my dissertation, as evidence of their eagerness to stand by their words and be present in distance to others. I have limited their identities to first names to protect their privacy.

Gruver, Texas

Life on a farm starts early in the morning. Davin, 47 years old, still rises early, even though he no longer farms for a living. He was the first to respond to my invitation to participate in the research study, the first to send in the consent form, and the first to fill out and email the introductory questionnaire.

When our research group takes up life in the John Paul II Online Research Center, Davin is the first person to speak, leading off each week with an early morning post. Perhaps this pattern of behavior and his penchant for brevity makes it increasingly obvious that he has been a farmer most of his adult life. He lives in Gruver, Texas, a rural community in the Texas panhandle with a population of 1,100. For a Texas farmer who wants to study Catholic theology, distance education is about the only option. As Davin tells us, "We are over one hundred miles to the nearest large college, and I don't even know how far one would have to travel to find a Master's in Catholic Theology."

Davin is married and the father of three children. His wife, Teague, is vice president of the local bank and earned her MBA degree seven years earlier. She was the push behind Davin's application for the MA program in theology. Davin is also a convert from evangelical Protestantism. He is currently working on two online master's degree programs at the same time and teaches business subjects at a local college. He describes himself as "honest and real, the same person online and offline, outgoing and affable, a self-starter, dependable, confident, and fairly well disciplined," although he confesses that occasionally he struggles with procrastination. His wife proofreads all his papers, listens well, and is a great encouragement for him.

Davin found it easy to contemplate the face of Christ in his farming days while riding on a tractor. Today, he prays in the early morning on walks, bike rides, and daily drives to work. He admits that he does experience the presence of Christ in the other

people he meets online at CDU, and shares their joys and concerns. He frequents the online Chapel and finds great encouragement in the online community, although he is saddened when he detects Protestant bashing among some of the CDU students. He is still a member of an online evangelical network where he finds opportunities to explain his Catholic faith to longtime friends. His evenings are reserved for the family.

As one of only two co-researchers who immediately uploads a photograph of himself, Davin appears to us in an official referee uniform on a basketball court; we learn that he loves sports, is competitive by nature, generous with his time, and has a natural smile. He quickly assumes a role of moral leadership in the research community and unselfishly opens himself to the needs of the community whenever a personal problem arises. He rejoices with those who are celebrating and suffers with those who reveal their suffering. In our eight-week sojourn together, he shares his own past marital struggles, a trip to Santa Fe, New Mexico, a wedding anniversary, and the volunteer work that he and his wife do to help married couples in crisis. His presence breaks through the invisible net that has caught us in our distance.

California Wine Country

Nancy hails from Acampo, California where she and her husband, Ted, grow grapes for local wineries. She is 57 years old and in the CDU Bachelor's degree-completion program where she hopes to earn the degree that she sacrificed for her family many years earlier. After retiring, she described a hunger that became a call to contemplate the face of Christ...to know, teach, and be able to discuss her faith with other Catholics. CDU became present to her through a search on the web when she discovered that she could earn her degree and deepen her faith together; for her it was a perfect match.

Nancy is very comfortable on the computer. She completed several computer science courses twenty-five years earlier, and has a daughter and son-in-law who

earned their degrees online. Choosing to contemplate the face of Christ through a computer-mediated community feels natural.

She describes herself as “more introverted than extroverted, analytical, determined, introspective, precise, idealistic...a true melancholic temperament with some choleric traits mixed in to keep things interesting!” She is a visual learner who finds online learning comfortable, relaxed, and non-threatening. She thinks she is more expressive online than face-to-face because it allows her more time to think before responding. Her textual online responses, she believes, reflect deeper insight and are better organized and more concise than if she were speaking to us face-to-face.

Nancy likes to read at the dining room table because of the ample natural light in the afternoon; she works on the computer in the multi-purpose room in her home that serves as an office, exercise room, grandchildren’s playroom, and computer room. She reveals her understanding of online communication by responding quickly and timely to postings to keep the virtual conversations spontaneous.

She volunteered to join the research community because she loves to learn, likes to be helpful, and was intrigued by the invitation to self-reflection. The online community makes Christ present to her in ways that are more open oftentimes than when she gathers with friends, family, and even with fellow parishioners. The CDU community surrounds her with like-minded believers who share the same faith and values. They continue to be role models who inspire her. Through them, Christ is present.

Charlottesville, Virginia

Lori lives near the grounds of one of the country’s prestigious Ivy League state universities, the University of Virginia (UVA), founded by Thomas Jefferson. Even though UVA offers a program in graduate religious studies, and her husband is professor of pediatrics in the medical school, Lori, who is 47, chooses CDU’s online graduate courses because CDU offers, in her words, “formation as well as knowledge.”

She also finds studying from home more appealing for personal reasons that include chronic health issues. She takes graduate courses at CDU, but has not joined the MA program, a fact that reflects her mixed reviews of the way CDU does online education.

Unlike some of her co-researchers, Lori is not comfortable with technology and brings no previous experience with online learning to CDU. Yet, she volunteers for the research community because of the sheer wonder she experiences every time she logs into the online campus. Lori calls it fascination. She wonders at the marvel of being home and at the same time connected to the whole world. She is fascinated that she has met like-minded adults who explore topics of similar interest, discuss with each other, and learn and grow in their faith together through their connection to the Internet. She senses that online education has more potential than what she has yet experienced at CDU. She hopes that my dissertation will help improve the educational experience. She also expresses frustration at the general lack of interest among so many Catholics about their faith. In describing herself, she comments, "I am, and have always been passionate about my faith and my relationship with Christ."

Lori makes herself present to the online community by checking the discussion on a daily basis. She loves the Chapel. She was the first person in the group to post a prayer intention in the private Chapel of the John Paul II Research Center and is usually the last person to have posted anytime you might happen to log on to visit the Chapel, a welcoming gate-keeper of the Chapel who promises to keep posted prayer intentions present in her daily prayers. She is sensitive, thoughtful, contemplative, and reveals in her text a caring concern for the needs of the research community. Her insights reflect an intelligent, transcendent spirit. She is the mother of two college-aged children.

Lori tells me that she is more challenging to others face-to-face than online, the opposite of how some online learners describe their behavior online as less intimidated and more open, like Nancy. Lori admits that she would challenge some comments posted in the online community if she were face-to-face in a class. Online she chooses

her words carefully because facial expressions and tone of voice are missing. She believes this makes the online experience limiting, as we try to discern each other's thought processes and experiences. One wonders if Lori herself has experienced misunderstanding or confusion in the limited social cues of the text-based online campus as she tries to communicate her own presence online.

Hurley, New York

Gayle Sharon turned 50 a week after she joins the John Paul II Online Research Community. She is enrolled in the BA Degree completion program with Nancy. Gayle finds CDU the day before the deadline to withdraw from Marist College where she is enrolled in a traditional accelerated degree completion program. CDU's distance education allows her the freedom to invest the time and thought into theology, which she describes as "the flexibility to live the rest of life around study." She chooses CDU because of its fidelity to the teachings of the Church, a distinction missing at Marist; and the distance format gives her the opportunity to "delve much more deeply into subjects of theological interest far more than if I were sitting in a lecture hall." She believes that the online experience has given her tremendous flexibility with her job, her volunteer work as a catechist for the Archdiocese of New York, and for personal recreation.

I am not surprised to discover that Gayle and her husband, Paul, have a pet turtle. Gayle's email address looks at first glance to spell *turtle lover*. What I cannot discern are the other pet residents of their home near Kingston, New York: a Yorkshire terrier named *Poco*, a canary, and two large fish tanks.

What surprises me about Gayle is her eagerness to participate in the research study after she reveals that she prefers paper-based independent study courses to online courses, primarily because she does not like to participate in online discussions. She tells me she does not participate in any voluntary online discussion forums in the online campus. On the other hand, she acknowledges that most required online

interaction with other students is helpful because it makes her “think and dig.” How strange I think for her to volunteer for eight weeks of online conversation and reflection with ten members of an online research community, most of whom she has not met, and none of her choosing.

I sense a tension in Gayle’s personality between her eagerness to participate in the research study, and her effort to protect her privacy as evidenced by anonymity in the tag line of her emails. She describes it as her “preferred personal distance from interpersonal communication.” What attracts me is her willingness, in her words, to “stretch herself and go beyond her comfort zone” for the benefit of my research.

Gayle does, indeed, stretch herself during our eight-weeks of conversation. She shows in every posting her confidence with text-based discussion, her expert knowledge of Sacred Scripture, a bright, reflective mind, and excellent communication skills. Gayle is a ten-year convert to Catholicism, having arrived in the Church from a ten-year personal journey in search of truth and unity. She is the daughter of a Presbyterian Minister and led Bible studies and retreats as a teenager that now make her leery of too much group sharing. She is the mother of three grown children, and the wife of a retired IBM computer engineer who entered her life through a Catholic online singles’ site. They have been happily married for five years and live in a home they are remodeling together.

Gayle is a morning person with her own computer room and a desktop PC. She sometimes begins studying by 5:30 a.m. when she is working part-time. Her daily study ends before 9 p.m.

Amherst, Ohio

Dr. Cathy is enrolled in the MA program. She lives on the extreme western edge of the Diocese of Cleveland in Amherst, Ohio. She is a single, 55 year-old medical doctor and graduate of Case Western Reserve University in Cleveland. She works part-

time as a medical expert witness in government sponsored court cases. Dr. Cathy's goal in completing her graduate studies at CDU is to work professionally for the Church. She now works as a volunteer but points out that the Cleveland Diocese does not recognize CDU's program for certification in pastoral ministry. This highlights the independence of each Catholic diocese in mandating its own certification requirements for professional employment with the diocese. Despite the lack of availability of distance education in a diocese with severe winters and a large geographical spread between the availability of traditional Catholic higher education in the eastern region of the diocese, and Dr. Cathy's location on the western fringe, she admits that her MA degree from CDU may do little to further her professional aspirations. Despite that, she wasted little time in joining CDU's program when she found it online.

Distance education is ideal for Dr. Cathy because she struggles with multiple health problems including asthma and resistant sinus infections that have left her hospitalized or debilitated. As she describes it, "My schedule is entirely dictated by health." As a physician she is accustomed to self-discipline, and has no difficulty with organization skills and motivation.

Dr. Cathy, like Gayle, progresses through her graduate program by living in the nineteenth century world of paper-based independent study courses. She comments, "I love the independence of paper-based courses, and I love being free from the requirement of participating in discussion with other students." While Dr. Cathy gives the impression of preferring the monastic approach to distance education, she, unlike Gayle, is very involved in the daily conversations in the online campus. She values the online community and is a frequent conversant in the voluntary areas of the campus such as the Café, the cohort rooms where students meet with the Dean of Students to prepare for comprehensive exams and their capstone papers, and the Chapel. Dr. Cathy logs on to the online campus daily and posts frequently in a variety of voluntary

discussion threads. She is well-known by the other members of the research group who appreciate her wit, intelligence, compassion, and sense of humor.

Dr. Cathy works at the same kitchen table where she shared meals with her parents and brother in the 1950's. She likens her ability to be present both at home at the kitchen table in Amherst and at CDU's online campus a *Star Trek experience*:

I find it exciting to log onto the computer and access the CDU campus. I look forward to it, and make contact daily or more. It eases my loneliness and isolation. I am dumbfounded that I can sit at my kitchen table, the very same table over which my family shared supper in the '50's, and be morphed to Virginia, making contact with classmates from around the world. It feels like a great adventure in a Star Trek episode.

As the only remaining resident of her family home, she finds the international student community at CDU exhilarating. She describes herself as orderly, meticulous, and always striving to do her best. She reflects, "I am thankful just to sit in the easy chair and freely breathe through my nose and lungs." When her poor health leads to bouts of discouragement about CDU's program—the expense, the intensity of the academic requirements, and the lack of support from her parish and diocese, Dr. Cathy thinks of quitting, but CDU staff have kept her going. Her own struggles have deepened her sincerity and generosity toward the needs of others in the online community; her frequent postings have given her the opportunity to share her wit and self-deprecating humor.

Elida, Ohio

Irene is 42 years old and the mother of seven children between the ages of 9 and 18. There are no Catholic colleges less than eighty miles from her home in the western part of Ohio, near Lima, and Irene's husband travels out-of-state every week. Online learning is the only realistic option for her. She is a student in the MA Program.

Unlike some of the other women in the research group, Irene is very comfortable with technology. She designed her own website and took computer programming classes in high school. She is a Director of Religious Education in a liberal Catholic parish but describes herself as conservative. She finds the CDU community a great support to her faith in living with the tension of this contrast.

Irene is more comfortable sharing conversation in the online community than face-to-face because posting text through her laptop computer gives her time to think. She describes herself as a little shy and tends to doubt her abilities at times. She participates more online than if she were in a traditional class. She appreciates the security of CDU's online community, and she likes to study with her children in the kitchen or in her bedroom, two rooms she describes as the family "Study Halls." She uses a Toshiba laptop computer with a wireless system that she shares with her husband; she has even studied in the aisle of a grocery store.

Online learning is less intimidating for Irene than a class. She is able to speak more openly in contrast to Lori, and is surprised by the amount of interaction in the online campus. She is led to contemplate the face of Christ by "the demonstrations of faith I see shared online—people in the worst situations showing the depth of their faith." When she receives expressions of prayerful support from other students, she comments, "It reminds me of how important it is to be present to each other." Irene's postings reflect the hectic demands of motherhood and professional work as her presence in the research community gradually diminishes toward the end of the eight week conversation. Her postings were most frequent on weekends.

Wurzburg, Germany

Pat delivers her fifth baby the day she registers for the MA Program at CDU. She is 43 years old and looking for a theology program online that has a pastoral, practical dimension, rather than the *heady* traditional theology programs typical of German

universities. CDU's online degree program delivered to her home is too good to pass up. CDU's former correspondence course model before 2000 would not have interested her. In her words, "It is a great relief to find like-minded persons, even if it is only in the virtual sense." She needs community and personal connection for success.

Pat is brand new to online learning, but it gives her husband and son an excuse to teach her the needed skills and keep the computer functioning so she feels less intimidated. All her children are exceedingly competent with computers, including her youngest who is now three. She is filled with awe at what she has been able to accomplish because of CDU. Her role model, however, is her mother in Canada, who thirty years ago used a modem to connect to the university and deliver papers where she worked and studied. In Pat's words, "It is simply a matter of experience and learning how to operate a machine."

According to Pat, the challenge of communicating online is how much we must pack into a few words to communicate ourselves to others. Face-to-face we have body language that helps communicate our presence. She comments:

I try not to use too many words in my postings so it isn't too much to read. No response from others does make me wonder if my comment was worthy of note. On the other hand, I have received personal emails from other students in response to something I posted. When that happens, it is like having my classmate actually present in my home drinking tea with me! It makes my day!

As a talkative night owl, Pat thinks she is ideal for online learning. In addition to three desktop computers in the house, Pat and her husband share a laptop. Most of her studying is done after 8 p.m. when the younger children are in bed or in the morning when the children are at school. She even uses the laptop in the kitchen.

One of the most interesting benefits of her CDU experience is the reaction of her children. They are fascinated to have a mother in school at home. Her oldest child, a son sixteen, reads much of her course material and loves to discuss it with her. He now engages in theological discussions with his school friends. Her daughters, ages 14 and

11, are also interested and ask many questions. They frequently take the information to school and correct their religious education teachers who are poorly catechized. Pat notes that her youngest children, ages six and three, have always slept during those nights when she needed to study for an exam or write a paper. Pat's example as an adult learner has increased the incentive of all the children to take school more seriously; in addition, their understanding of the faith is leaps and bounds beyond their classmates. Pat injects humor by noting that her children also want to know their mother's grades. Pat reports that in the Wiedemer household, all grades are public!

Pat explains the significance of CDU's online community for her. This is the first time in her life that she can wholeheartedly say that she believes fully what the Church teaches because this is the first time that she has understood what the Church teaches and why. In her youth she was not given answers to questions about her faith, and as a member of a generation on the verge of the Internet, she could find information on anything at any time, except from the Church. The availability of courses from CDU, the access to discussion about newly released Papal encyclicals, the open forums in the Café and student cohort discussion rooms, has greatly deepened her faith. What a thrill to find other adults who are asking the same questions and finding the same answers! A sign of the spiritual void of so many Catholics today is the growth of CDU. She adds, "With answers I can pray better, and embrace better what I profess to believe."

For Pat, school in the past was about grades. With CDU, it is about learning to know God. "God doesn't care about marks. My CDU experience is about personal spiritual development." The online community has enabled Pat to identify with fellow students. When one student passes comps, Pat is given hope that she can do it too. She sees so many similarities in their deep hunger for Christ. She describes it as though "His light has connected us." She easily finds Christ present in the members of the online community.

Pat's professional work as a musician, catechist, and Vacation Bible School Director for the U.S. Military community will end, as the U.S. military post will close at the end of the year. Pat has no idea where God will lead her, and she misses the parish community life that her CDU classmates describe, since for her the American Military community will soon be leaving Germany when the base closes. As she says, "Surely God wants us to move out beyond the virtual world and actually touch people with our bodily presence."

The German churches have no faith formation programs for adults. Pat is also a member of the Schoenstatt Movement in Germany. She gives a presentation on faith formation through CDU to a Schoenstatt Committee; they are interested in starting something like this in Germany; however, one cannot attend the university in Germany if he or she does not have a university background, a decision that is made in grade four. The flexibility of the online format opens up a way to draw men and women into a high quality, spiritually stimulating, academic program while continuing to work and fulfill regular duties.

Pat is an extrovert who would probably joke more if she were face-to-face, since she could sense the other person's sense of humor. Online, however, she has the opportunity to think through her responses and edit to add additional thoughts that come to mind. Since she has lived overseas for more than twenty-five years, she is accustomed to telephone and email relationships. Email is better than telephone to her, but personal aspects are still missing.

She describes her experience of starting at CDU in this way: "It was as if a door had opened and I was able to breathe." She describes the many obstacles she has overcome with distance education—delayed book deliveries, customs fees, cost of tuition—yet everything has fallen into place, which Pat interprets as a sign to her that God wanted her to do the program. She is trying to carry this trust into new

professional opportunities when she is armed with her MA Degree in Theology. She concludes:

I love what I am doing and learning. It has become a passion...Our lives have changed, my marriage has improved, and life is better...CDU and the presence of the online community have convinced me that in a world of cynicism and secularism, I am not alone and there does indeed exist a universal Church.

Dartmouth, Nova Scotia

Debbie is one of the last to join the John Paul II Research Community. She is 56 years old and holds a professional position as the director of Faith Formation at a parish in Nova Scotia. In that position she forms an RCIA (Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults) team to work with those interested in learning more about the Catholic Church; she establishes a "Catholics Coming Home" program for Catholics no longer attending Church; she coordinates the children's catechetics program and prepares students of all ages for reception of the sacraments. She is also an MA student at CDU, the wife of Wayne, her husband, with whom she has been married for 30 years, and the mother of three sons. She has a science background and struggles writing essays. Much of her time in undergraduate studies was spent in the lab when the English majors were learning how to write. She is a self-proclaimed procrastinator though she has moved through the graduate program with regularity. Debbie is an extrovert and friends with one of my former graduate classmates, a Canadian Franciscan religious sister, Sister Johanna, who teaches at Franciscan University in Steubenville, Ohio. Debbie is also a Third Order or Secular Lay Franciscan herself, reflecting the Franciscan spirit of simplicity and humility. In our research community she is an encourager, frequently praising others before mentioning herself. "I just want to tell you that you are wonderful workers for the Lord and to keep up the great work!" This comes before she mentions what she does at her parish.

Debbie is at ease with technology. She studies in a computer room at home with her son, Justin, who is finishing an engineering degree. She tells us that her family is accustomed to their mother as a student from home. They encourage and prod with pride that their mother has been at it for a number of years. As a science major, Debbie first worked with computers in 1973 using a Honeywell 316. Today she uses PCs, a cell phone, an IPAC, DVD, CD players and scans photos for the research community. The members of our community agree that Nova Scotia would be a great place to rendezvous face-to-face. That thought leads us to contemplate lobster dinners, as the other Canadian in our group reminisces about her honeymoon in Nova Scotia. Debbie is proud of the beauty of her Canadian Province and eagerly invites us to camp out at her parish hall when we come, but warns that lobster is expensive and not something they eat often.

Debbie likes meeting new people and learning new things. She is a strong proponent of face-to-face encounters when possible, but she also likes to be alone and contemplative in her prayer. She notes that personhood is centered in relationship, and the online community broadens our horizons but, in her opinion, is a trade-off because it weakens the bonds of the local community. Family bonds may also be weakened, she warns, if too much time is spent with the computer. As a member of the research community who expresses reservations about the online experience, she is in the minority. Her humility keeps her open-minded, and her preference for traditional classes adds to the richness of the dialogue as the weeks reveal more clearly distinctive personalities, persuasive arguments, and growing bonds of friendship. Contemplating the face of Christ in digitized symbols projected on computer screens slowly replaces the loss of finding Christ reflected in the human face.

Modesto, California

Deacon James, known as Deacon Jim in the research community, is 39 years old and describes himself as jovial, practical, and humorous, with an engineer's personality and a problem-solving approach to life. Although his professional work as a software developer and his penchant for online learning supports the engineering metaphor, his personality radiates an ease and love for people, even through the limitations of text in the online research community. Despite the press of full-time work and study in the MA Theology program, this self-proclaimed *Computer Geek* is an ordained permanent deacon in the Catholic Church with a variety of ministerial assignments of service that reveal an ontological identity with Christ through his ordination and a natural love for others. His wife is a medical doctor. Both share a commitment to serving others physically and spiritually. Deacon Jim admits to an anxiety about time.

Deacon Jim is one of two co-researchers, both men, who built their own desktop computers. Jim is so comfortable with technology that he has a computer to fit each mood and location in his home. His descriptions of home conjure up a California lifestyle that allows for life lived outside much of the year, and his computers accompany him wherever he goes.

Having arrived at CDU with previous experience in online learning, Deacon Jim comes armed with knowledge of some of the advantages of online learning. He believes that online classmates are "even more supportive and helpful than those in face-to-face classes." The online format also contributes, in his opinion, to forming peer relationships more quickly. He calls the bulletin board online system "the great leveler." He believes that peer relationships are formed more quickly, more questions are asked, and more "intimate" questions are asked earlier in the online class. He promises to take full advantage of these benefits to quickly establish relationships, giving as much warmth and support as he hopes to receive from his classmates, perhaps even more.

Community is very important to Deacon Jim, as it provides a rich support system, in his words. His singular anxiety, to which his conversation returns, is keeping up with the level of his classmates and the demands of the program. However, he sees the face of Christ in every person and each encounter online. In his opinion, "It may be more difficult to see online, but I will look."

Abilene, Kansas

Leo is a warm-hearted, 44 year-old Army Air National Guard helicopter pilot, a single dad, and the father of five children. He holds down full-time and part-time jobs while working on a master's degree in theology at CDU. Despite his hectic schedule, he volunteers for the research to contemplate the face of Christ through technology, becoming the third male in our ten-member group.

Like the other two men in the group, Leo is at home with technology. He uses a home-built desktop computer to study, a laptop for travel, and a Macintosh computer to take his exams. He still admits to not knowing how to type, despite spending an average of twenty to twenty-five hours a week on a computer. His expertise is self-taught.

In his words, Leo is an *extroverted introvert*, which he explains is someone who is by nature an introvert, but realizes the importance of opening up to others. In a traditional class he would "pipe up pretty readily," a description more typical of an extrovert. He brought his children to CDU to meet the staff one summer during a family vacation to Washington, DC, another sign of an extrovert.

Leo believes that online learning takes more effort to stay focused because of the ease of distractions, a common struggle for extroverted personalities. Questions take more effort to be answered when one cannot simply raise a hand in class. However, Leo has mastered the challenges of distance education by completing a bachelor's degree through Excelsior College that required both online and paper-based courses. Leo also

tested out of courses through the military competency examination system. He acknowledges that he would prefer a traditional class, but has no comparable traditional program in theology available in Abilene. Even if there were such a program, Leo needs the flexibility of setting his own study schedule.

He remains religiously faithful about participating in online discussions and believes that community is extremely important for the online learner because it validates the knowledge one gains. "With self-study or even one-on-one learning, the only confidence is that one has received the information delivered, but there is no validation." He expects the members of the online community to openly share their knowledge and faith for the improvement of the entire group.

For him, the CDU online community is one of many communities in the Church. The openness of the members at CDU helps to strengthen the faith of everyone. Leo has no trouble finding Christ there: "...to see the face of Christ in text takes an adjustment in one's outlook, but once the adjustment is made, Christ shines through..."

Seeking our Lived Experience

What is the setting in which Christ shines through for Leo, and hope accompanies participation in the life of this research community? Our research is carried out in lived experience that Leo calls "an adjustment of outlook." Signs of life for us are keyboard symbols, numbered responses, digital time on a twenty-four hour clock, and names emboldened at the top of every text box creating distinctive human presence in the minds of each of us. Every combination of letters in bold creates a mental picture of a person. As Gadamer (1960/1999) reminds us, "The mode of being of a text has something unique and incomparable about it...In deciphering and interpreting it, a miracle takes place..." (p. 163). This is the landscape provided by our conferencing software called Caucus. We come together by typing on a computer, but our typing is done in solitude. We log on in no special order or pattern of predictability.

Part of the daily adventure is discovering the unique pattern of presence in text, the surprise of living in a community of persons who give the gift of presence to each other by clicking and typing at the moment that suits each one best.

Human presence is infinitely variable and attractive. Gabriel Marcel (1937/1951/1967) describes it as *intersubjective*, a term that unlocks his understanding of life as participation: “At the root of presence, there is a being who takes me into consideration, who is regarded by me as taking me into account. Now, by definition, an object does not take me into account” (p. 153). The task for the next eight weeks is to dwell in accumulating text as we commit our fingers to manipulate an object that does not take us into account, but allows us to take each other into account. What is human presence in distance? Marcel describes presence as a gift: “Presence as response to the act by which the subject opens himself to receive; in this sense it is the gift of oneself. Presence belongs only to the being who is capable of giving himself” (p. 153). This is a community that dwells in hope for the gift of self as presence in distance. How do we give ourselves in text on computer screens? Who do we become as both givers and receivers through technology? Dr. Leticia Soberón (2007) calls us “beneficiaries and promoters...giving and receiving in a fruitful dialogue...” (p. 3). Heidegger (1953/1993c) encourages the questioning of technology: “We look into the danger and see the growth of the saving power” (p. 338). These questions commit us to keyboards for eight weeks to explore who we are in the lived experience of an online learning community that seeks the face of Christ.

Connecting to the Machine

Human beings do not live for the sake of technology, civilization, or even culture; they live by means of these things, always preserving their own purpose. (Karol Wojtyła [Pope John Paul II], 1977/1993, p. 179)

The research community begins its work by reflecting on the object that enables them to participate and form a community. The computer is a machine, an object that becomes the invisible partner of each member of the online community. As we read each other's presence in text, we forget the presence of a computer as integral to the presence of self in a digitized world. For Pat, the computer is a machine that functions as a tool: "I can communicate and involve myself in other people's lives through the machine, but not because of the machine. The computer, like the TV, is under our control."

Descriptions of comfort with computers are not gender-based: Irene, Nancy, and Debbie were science majors with previous courses in computer science; they have no anxiety about using computers. Irene, however, confesses that her feelings toward her laptop "depend on how healthy the computer is and how solid my wireless connection is." Davin admits it makes him nervous when he emails a paper or exam to a professor: "I get nervous; e-communication is not always reliable." Only the men in the community describe the computer as a toy, and they are the only ones who tell us they build their own computers. Only the women—four of them—acknowledge discomfort and lack of experience with technology. Gayle gives us a story to explain how technology intimidates her. She confesses she cannot use a cell phone. She was ticketed by a New York State Policeman for not wearing a seatbelt; she had spent so much time trying to figure out how to call her husband on her new cell phone that she drove off forgetting to put on her seatbelt. The cell phone cost her \$110 for the traffic ticket, and her husband did not find out she would be two hours late. She still does not know how to use it. Dr. Cathy admits that her best friend in college dated an engineering student named Craig whom she and her roommate thought was crazy because of his fascination for computers! Dr. Cathy says, "He is Craig Newmark, the genius behind craigslist.org!"

Dwelling at Home

Most of the members of the research community have more than one computer in the home. Most also describe a special place in the home for the computer and favorite places in the home to use their laptop computers. Deacon Jim has enough computers to match the location and atmosphere of each living space in his home, whether inside or outdoors. He describes computers as though they are articles of clothing or pieces of furniture that can be changed to fit a mood or décor:

I have a desktop, two laptops, two Internet Tablets, two PDAs and a cell phone...I have a setup with my desktop computer (self-built), which I use for my 'buckle down and study' time, as well as docking stations for my two laptops. I can use the laptops anywhere around the house—especially in my comfortable chair in my family room and my lawn chair and hammock in the backyard garden.

Davin likes to work in his office in the front of the house where he has a window into the living room; he can see and be seen by his children many times a day. Nancy, Gayle, and Debbie have rooms in their homes just for computer use that are conducive to study, and Dr. Cathy shares the kitchen table with her desktop workstation. Busy mothers like Irene and Pat use laptops that move from room to room.

Leder (1990) describes the reciprocal adjustment of the body to tools: "To incorporate a tool is to redesign one's extended body until its extremities expressly mesh with the world" (p. 34). He points out that tools are designed with the human body in mind: "Ordinarily, any tool will have one end specifically adapted to our human anatomy" (p. 34). He describes the process of adjustment between the body and a tool as incorporation: "...incorporation is the result of a rich dialectic wherein the world transforms my body, even as my body transforms its world" (p. 34). Every member of the research community acknowledges the dialectic between the computer and home, as it influences the interior design and use of space in the home. The choice

of where to use the computer reveals aspects of personality and behavior that are unique to each person. The computer is an object that when connected to the human body and the Internet at the same time, choreographs the fingers to dance in abstract visual text. The machine anchors us in the comfort of home and launches us into human presence in cyberspace where bonds of community form in space that overcome the geography of place.

Dr. Cathy notes her gratitude for learning keyboarding as an essential skill to life with a computer, while Leo admits that with twenty to twenty-five hours a week on the computer, he still doesn't know how to type. Leder (1990) describes the learning of a skill as a disappearance of embodiment, once we have mastered the skill: "If absence lies at the heart of the lived body, then any extension of its sensorimotor powers must necessarily involve an extension of absence. This then explains the experiential disappearance that accompanies the incorporation of skills" (p. 31). Even those members of the research community who acknowledge ignorance and anxiety about technology express great enthusiasm for online learning once they master the basic functions of the conferencing software. Gayle recommends taking an introductory computer course before starting an online program, a recommendation from her spouse who is a retired IBM computer engineer. In addition, numerous research studies support the benefit of orientation programs when technology adaptation skills are included in the orientation (Boston, 1992; Dede, 1996; Gibson, 1996; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, & Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994). The CDU online community creates a *Welcome Book* for new students, made up of instructions on how to use the conferencing software. *Welcome* is of German derivation, meaning a "pleasant or hearty greeting or reception given to a visitor or a stranger on arrival at a house or other place" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 3731). The *Welcome Book* confirms that cyberspace becomes a home for those who join the online community at CDU.

The Supreme Danger

The conversation about computers naturally leads to dangers inherent in too much computer use. Heidegger (1953/1993c) describes the supreme danger of technology as that which reduces man to something even less than an object: “Enframing blocks the shining-forth and holding sway of truth. The destining that sends into ordering is consequently the extreme danger” (p. 333). He describes what happens when we allow ourselves to be concealed by the instrumentality of technology:

But enframing does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and to everything that is. As a destining, it banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing... (p. 322)

He explains that the danger is not the technology: “Technology is not demonic; but its essence is mysterious. The essence of technology, as a destining of revealing, is the danger” (p. 333). When technology itself becomes the source of our revealing, Heidegger describes this as enframing, which denies man the revealing of truth:

The threat to man does not come in the first instance from the potentially lethal machines and apparatus of technology. The actual threat has already afflicted man in his essence. The rule of enframing threatens man with the possibility that it could be denied to him to enter into a more original revealing and hence to experience the call of a more primal truth. (p. 333)

Davin reveals his awareness of the danger of enframing. He tells us that evenings are reserved for the family. He makes sure his online activities are done early in the morning and during the day. Leo tells us how his troubled son lived in a bedroom with a computer for months before getting help. Davin and Dr. Cathy confess they have voluntarily given up computer use as a penance, out of fear that it was enframing. Dr. Cathy notes the irony that she avoided computers for years and now worries that her computer use could become excessive and dangerous. Lori warns, “Discernment and balance are needed when using new technology.” *Discern* (Oxford English Dictionary,

1971, p. 740) is a verb from Old French and Latin that means to separate, to distinguish. In technology, Heidegger (1953/1993c) calls us to distinguish between the “essential unfolding in technology, instead of merely gaping at the technological” (p. 337). He warns us to guard the highest dignity of persons that is threatened in enframing:

This dignity lies in keeping watch over the unconcealment—and with it, from the first, the concealment—of all essential unfolding on this earth. It is precisely in enframing, which threatens to sweep man [*sic*] away into ordering as the ostensibly sole way of revealing, and so thrusts man into the danger of the surrender of his free essence—it is precisely in this extreme danger that the innermost indestructible belongingness of man within granting may come to light, provided that we, for our part, begin to pay heed to the essence of technology. (p. 337)

More subtle aspects of enframing dwell close to the surface of our conversations during the weeks ahead. We will explore the ethical dimensions of how we use technology and the threat of enframing in the daily life of the online learning community.

A Bridge to the World

In his essay, *The Question Concerning Technology*, Heidegger (1953/1993c) emphasizes the relationship between freedom and truth. Every member of the research community describes his or her relationship to technology as an opening; technology expands their world in ways that are essential to them as learners. Davin calls his computer a door: “...open like a doorway open to the world...like reading a book opens your mind to a whole new world...the computer virtually opens me to the world.” Heidegger writes: “Freedom governs the free space in the sense of the cleared, which is to say, the revealed. To the occurrence of revealing, i.e., of truth, freedom stands in the closest and most intimate kinship” (p. 330). Dr. Cathy, Gayle, and Lori now feel a sense of accomplishment and mastery over their computers, a sense of freedom that the tool of the computer has been successfully incorporated into their world, and their world is now more open to truth.

For men like Leo, the computer brings freedom for education, freedom from other people's schedules, and links for social networking. For Gayle and Deacon Jim, the computer brings freedom for love. Deacon Jim explains the detailed signals, symbols, and text messaging that he and his wife, Melissa, use to frequently communicate with each other when she is on call as a medical resident. Gayle meets her husband through a Catholic social networking website. Lori calls her computer, "a connection with like-minded people who have similar goals." Pat describes her feelings when she began the online Master's program: "It was as if a door had opened, and I was able to breathe."

Despite the challenges—Dr. Cathy comments "When technology does not work well, online learning can be a nightmare!"—the consensus, in Lori's words, is "Amazing!" Gayle describes a similar relationship to her computer: "I don't know how I would live in the twenty-first century without it."

Nancy notes the freedom from time and place of the traditional classroom and the freedom of speech online with no fear of confrontation to intimidate her: "I love learning and information so I love the computer. It is an indispensable twenty-first century tool..." And Gayle adds, "Logging on to a computer gives me a sense of connectedness to the world. The stage is endless...of people, knowledge, resources, and connections to assist any possible inquiry my little brain might have." Dr. Cathy agrees: "I am fascinated by my computer, and enjoy the Internet tremendously. I find it exciting to log on and access the CDU campus. I look forward to it; it eases my loneliness and isolation." Irene admits, "I feel strangely disconnected when I don't have my wireless online access."

To *connect* is a verb from the Latin that means to tie, fasten, or join together (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 520). The computer enables persons throughout the world to connect, to join together, to be fastened as a learning community at CDU. The

computer with its hardware, software, and communications connection to the Internet is also a bridge. Heidegger (1951/1993d) describes the importance of a bridge as a locale:

...a locale comes into existence only by virtue of the bridge. The bridge is a thing;...Only things that are locales allow for spaces... a space is something that has been made room for, something that has been freed, namely with a boundary...A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its essential unfolding...Accordingly, spaces receive their essential being from locales and not from "space." (p. 356)

The computer as a bridge creates particular locales where the online community dwells in social spaces, educational course rooms, student-faculty discussion areas, contemplative spiritual areas, and academic cohort areas. Heidegger reminds us that the root word *technē* from the Greek means "to make something appear, letting appear" (p. 361). The online research community reveals that for them, the computer is the essential unfolding of connection, of being fastened to knowledge of the world and to one another. O'Donohue (1999) describes locale as frame, and emphasizes the importance of a frame as necessary for human presence:

Where there is neither frame nor frontier, it is difficult to feel any presence. This is our human difficulty with air...All of human experience comes to expression in some kind of form or frame...The frame focuses individuality and gathers presence. Without this frame, neither identity nor belonging would ever be possible. (p. 70)

He worries about the world's addiction to vast shapeless expanses like the World Wide Web and globalization (p. 69). The online learning community at CDU overcomes the shapelessness of cyberspace by creating secure locales named by digitized text that creates the reality of place. The software is programmed to parallel earth-bound places where adult learners carry out educational and communal activities. The design of the online campus reflects earth-bound reality made present in text that reveals and

conceals real human community whose dimensions are deepened by dialogue, presence, and faith.

For many adults, technology is seen not as a bridge but a threat. Pat, as a fluent speaker of German, is much more conscious of how attitudes and philosophy seep into the every day language of German that is not her native tongue. When she arrived in Germany twenty-five years ago, she recalls the German phrase for asking for her telephone number *Haben Sie Telephone?* (Do you have a phone?) Thinking it was an idiom of German, she learned years later that most of her neighbors did not have a telephone, a circumstance she had never experienced, since her family in Canada had a telephone in every room. Today the question for inquiring about an email address is *Haben Sie Internet?* She believes these idiomatic phrases reflect reluctance, fear, and ignorance of a new tool. She laughs when her neighbors in Wurzburg tell her they do not believe in the Internet. She comments, "I find it hard not to burst out laughing at such a denial of reality. They have failed to develop a correct understanding of a tool."

As Heidegger (1953/1993c) warns, "...the danger may remain that in the midst of all that is correct, the true will withdraw" (p. 331). Pat's home reveals a family who feels comfortable living with computers: they have three desktop computers and two laptops for her five children, including the three-year old. "I cannot imagine not having this connection to the world in my home!" Gayle concurs with Pat and mentions her former Protestant fundamentalist days when dancing, TV, and women wearing pants and short hair were thought to be demonic.

Online Communication is a Con

As a research community, the conversations reflect openness to the benefits and drawbacks of being present in technology. Dr. Cathy takes a stand against technologically-mediated communication and calls online communication a con in the sense that Dr. Drew Leder (1990) thinks of modern technology as a form of

concealment. Her stand develops into a new threaded discussion. In referring specifically to the telephone, Leder comments, "The telephone, while allowing communication through its amplification of voice, in other ways yields a reduced encounter devoid of direct sight and touch" (p. 181). He believes that the two-edged sword of technology is its reduction of direct experience with the world: "Ultimately, this disappearance of the body and automaton alike can bring about a sort of world-disappearance, a reduction of certain possibilities of encounter" (p. 181). As a medical expert witness for the government, Dr. Cathy observes:

Seeing the claimant in the court room provides so much information not available through reading files. In medical practice, I came to recognize how much I had missed of the patient's real intentions when I talked on the phone.

This is the sense in which online communication is a *con*. Dr. Cathy is concerned about how online conversation may influence the judgments we make about one another. Her advice is to leave nothing implied or unsaid. "Written language must accurately convey true meaning in the written word. We have no body language to inform us online."

Leder makes a similar observation: "I speak differently on the phone than I do in person, just as this work has been influenced by its creation on a computer, not through the medium of typewriter or pen" (p. 182). What is revealed when human presence is compressed into digitized text alone, I wonder. How is online text a *con*?

Con, according to the Oxford English Dictionary (1971, p. 751), is shorthand for the Italian preposition, *contra*, which means *against*. In what way is online communication a phenomenon of concealment, actually working against communication? I am reminded that the root word of communication is *communica*, to impart or transmit something intangible to another as a partaker (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 485). Dr. Cathy implies in her use of *con* that what is transmitted through the technology of online text may work against the authentic transmission of self to another. The imparting of presence may, because of the limitations of the writer's

written text or the reader's reading of text, or the technology, or by conscious manipulation, transmit a presence that contradicts the authentic self in his or her mysterious fullness of presence.

Lori, Nancy, and Gayle agree with Dr. Cathy about the care that we should take when we represent ourselves in language. Nancy describes how difficult it is for her: "I can edit and rewrite until it no longer makes sense; then I take a break, and things seem clearer...it is easier to spot subtleties in tone or semantics. Asynchronous time allows that luxury." Lori agrees: "I always write and re-write. I try to get a sense of people through what they write, but I wonder how accurate that picture is?" Dr. Cathy notes that she is often surprised when she sees a photo of someone she has come to know online. "Never judge a book by its cover," she warns.

Heidegger (1953/1993c) describes the tension that exists in the lure of technology because of what it reveals and what it conceals:

The irresistibility of ordering and the restraint of the saving power draw past each other like the paths of two stars in the course of the heavens. But precisely this, their passing by, is the hidden side of their nearness...The question concerning technology is the question concerning the constellation in which revealing and concealing, in which the essential unfolding of truth propriates. (p. 338)

The online researchers acknowledge the limitations of textual presence and warn of the danger of making hasty judgments. Heidegger describes the ultimate delusion of technology as the point where man "exalts himself and postures as lord of the earth" (p. 332). In the end, we isolate ourselves when we use technology to construct a world of our own imagination that does not reflect the truth of reality. Heidegger calls this the final delusion: "...it seems as though man everywhere and always encounters only himself" (p. 332). The research community continues to reflect on the dimensions of written text in our online identities. Text that hides us from each other and reveals us

through the manipulation of software and the choice of words that create a persona we project, or an authentic self that we allow to be revealed.

My CDU Self

Rilke (1905/1996) writes about the divine relationship of God's presence in us:

I want to unfold.
Let no place in me hold itself closed,
For where I am closed, I am false.
I want to stay clear in your sight. (p. 59)

The conversation travels from communication as a con to the creation of an online persona. Dr. Cathy describes an evening news segment about the attraction of personas in virtual reality. The word, *persona*, is the Latin word for *person*, that originally meant a mask used by one who plays or performs or acts out a dramatic character (Oxford English Dictionary, p. 2141). In contemporary usage it can refer to a character in literature, but more commonly refers to Jung's analytic psychology "where a conscious artificial or masked personality complex is developed in contrast to innate personality characteristics for purposes of concealment, defense, deception, or adaptation to one's environment" (*New International Webster's Dictionary and Thesaurus of the English Language*, 2002, p. 724). Dr. Cathy confesses that even in the world of every day life she sometimes feels like a phony because she finds it necessary to parrot back what she thinks other people want to hear, even when she doesn't agree with or understand fully the position she takes, as with someone in authority like a professor. She mentions aspects of her personality that she frequently hides such as her faith and her sense of humor. While admitting that CDU is easier to be true to herself, she still asks if she has a CDU self that she consciously crafts for the online community.

Dr. Cathy tells us she feels most herself in the online Café, but even there she acknowledges her awareness that she is being judged. She also finds it easier to hide her

negative self online, as the “time-delay cuts down on impulsiveness.” She reports that if she becomes upset, she can ponder how best to reply or not reply at all. She wonders if this is typical of everyone in the online community.

Gayle believes that the online experience is not inherently more false or more easily fabricated: “You are no more assured of a person’s realness at a party, a bar, or any other public venue than online. People often create a persona that is less than accurate at work, with strangers, at a party, on a date...” Gayle believes the reality of her self is most visible at CDU because she is interacting with people who share her passion for God and truth.

Davin believes he is the same person online and offline. He admits, however, that he is a leader at his parish and in the community, but at CDU he tries to listen and contribute without talking too much. His laugh is booming, but the online community, fortunately or unfortunately, doesn’t hear it. Lori concurs with Davin that she is very much herself in the online community because she loves theology. She adds that her theological studies also form her spiritually, which is most important to her, and for that she must be authentic. However, she is especially conscious of her postings because the emotional factors of face and voice are missing.

Irene, on the other hand, agrees with Gayle that she is more herself online than in person, especially discussing theology. She explains that she is shy by nature; she works in a liberal parish that does not reflect her understanding of the Catholic faith. The three theology courses she has completed at CDU have strengthened her self-confidence.

Deacon Jim thinks the creation of a persona is easier online than face-to-face. “In fact, even when we are being ourselves, we are presenting a persona that is but a fraction of who we are.” Intentionally misrepresenting yourself is easier online, he thinks, because it is more difficult to present a full picture of who you are only through text.

Nancy agrees with Irene and Gayle that she is more herself online at CDU, in part because of hostility to the Catholic faith in the general public, and even among some Catholics who don't understand the teachings of the Church. She quotes a priest who describes the difficulty of speaking openly about faith as a type of martyrdom. Gayle adds, "[We have]...an intrinsic desire to share the oneness that He has infused us with, as members of the Body of Christ. The Triune God is pure relationship."

Davin, as a convert, describes how he hides his Catholic faith, the "big elephant in the dining room," when he visits his family who are Protestant and his in-laws who are Catholic but do not attend Church. Davin comments, "...it hurts not being able to share something so deep and special as your relationship to God."

Pat thinks CDU has enriched her authentic persona. "I notice the flow moving from CDU to my regular self...The more in-depth and involved I become with my studies and consequent spiritual journey, the more I see my every day self becoming and behaving according to what I have learned." She adds that Christ also had a hard time being accepted by his community in Galilee.

Lori adds that the more we mature, the more we grow toward an authentic self and the less afraid we are to let others see it. Davin thinks we need to know ourselves. He asks if when we know ourselves and are "comfortable in our own skin," are we better able to reach out to others?" Gayle agrees and adds that the more we know God, the more we know ourselves: "The more we know ourselves, the more of ourselves we have to give." O'Donohue (1999) describes the transformation of God's presence in our lives: "Perhaps the secret of spiritual integrity has to do with an act of acceptance, namely, a recognition that you are always already within the divine embrace" (p. 227).

Deacon Jim distinguishes between consciously crafting a persona and being authentic but limited: "Even face-to-face, we are still only giving and receiving a limited view of a person. Even spouses who should know one another most intimately can be surprised by a facet of personality that had not been seen before."

Lori believes that God reveals us to ourselves: "God is the best psychiatrist ever! Knowledge of self is what the spiritual journey is all about." Like Gayle, she believes that the better we know ourselves the more authentic we are, and the more we can give to others through compassion and love. Our own weaknesses help us be more compassionate toward others: "Love flows through us from God to others...It's like God clears a path in us so love can flow freely!" She adds that we learn patience with others by seeing how patient God is with us.

Persona is a phenomenon of the human personality, not necessarily connected to being present in the distance of online text. The growing relationship to Christ as the "Way, the Truth, and the Life" allows us to let ourselves be revealed in the way that Heidegger (1953/1993c) speaks of *technē*: "Once the revealing that brings forth truth into the splendor of radiant appearance was also called *technē*" (p. 339). Nancy comments: "At CDU we find companions who satisfy our 'longing to belong,' where we can be ourselves because we can speak openly about our faith."

Deacon Jim questions the complexity and motive of persona. "Are we modifying our public face, our persona, to be better perceived? Does our inner self become over time that modified public face?" Gayle agrees that motive is behind the crafting of a persona. She reflects on painful aspects of her past: "My very long journey to emotional stability was a journey to see myself with the dignity God gave me, knowing myself, as you say. The more we open our hearts to God and see ourselves in his light, the less we need to modify our public face. Becoming transparent becomes much less intimidating." The online conversations lead to agreement that knowledge of being loved by God enables us to be revealed instead of needing to project.

Heidegger (1951/1993d) discusses the relationship between dwelling and building and thinking: "Only if we are capable of dwelling, only then can we build" (p. 362). He then describes dwelling as "the basic character of Being," and links building to thinking: "But that thinking itself belongs to dwelling in the same sense as building,

although in a different way...Building and thinking are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling" (p. 362). The research community suggests that dwelling in the love of God helps us to think less of projecting a persona and more able to build relationships that enhance our being. Heidegger describes our plight as connected to the meaning of dwelling: "The proper dwelling plight lies in this that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell" (p. 363). In what way does text enhance our dwelling in the online learning community? How do we build with text?

The "Destining" of Software

Human presence in technology is a phenomenon limited by the functioning of objects called software and hardware. Heidegger (1953/1993c) describes the dangers of enframing as a destining that limits the revealing of truth: "But enframing does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself...As a destining, it banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering" (p. 332). How does software become a destining of ordering?

Nancy apologizes that her post does not reflect the previous post by Gayle, because while Nancy was editing her post, she did not see Gayle's post. Dr. Cathy explains how to hold your spot in line: "I circumvent the problem by immediately posting my first few words, then clicking on 'edit' and continuing. This reserves my place in line." Gayle responds by reassuring Nancy and Dr. Cathy that she is not bothered by the limitations of software. "Posting is like giving of yourself. We may never know the full impact nor should we be so arrogant to believe that everything we say has value for others." Deacon Jim lightens our perspective by calling simultaneous postings "fun." He reminds us: "We are writing about the same things at the same time in cyberspace!" Pat adds that having a transcript of our postings delights her when she

observes how well she and others write: “We do get to see ourselves speaking. It can be very therapeutic!”

Reveal or Project?

The conversation inevitably returns to the authenticity of identity when we are present in technology. Gayle interjects an ethical dimension to the use of the editing feature of the software that powers the online discussion. She describes editing as *revealing* or *projecting*:

I have witnessed editing abused in an attempt to alter evidence of unwise words. When editing is abused it reveals the motive of the writer to project rather than to reveal. This diminishes authentic communication.

Nancy thinks *reveal* suggests something being disclosed that perhaps was hidden; it implies trust. She adds that projecting is good when we are speaking or singing, but motive and circumstances may change it from trust to distrust. She thinks text-only communication can be easily misunderstood by a reader. Lori agrees that *project* has a negative connotation. The reader can mistakenly project meaning that may be negative or positive; as writer or reader we may have ulterior motives or preconceived ideas that we consciously project.

The etymology of *reveal* is veil from Old French (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 2527). The first meaning has religious connotations: to disclose, to make known to someone in a supernatural manner. The theologians of the Second Vatican Council (1965) write about the revelation of God as a call of friendship:

In his goodness and wisdom, God chose to reveal himself and to make known to us the hidden purpose of his will by which through Christ, the Word made flesh, man might in the Holy Spirit have access to the Father and come to share in the divine nature. Through this revelation, therefore, the invisible God out of the abundance of his love speaks to men as friends and lives among them, so that he may invite and take them into fellowship with Himself. (*Dei Verbum*, p. 3)

Reveal in this context is a gift received by those who could not otherwise know that the gift even exists. *Project*, on the other hand, is from Latin and Old French and means to drive out or reproach (p. 2320). Referring to mental operations, it means to plan, contrive, devise, or design something to be done or action to be taken or proceeding to be carried out. It also means to scheme.

Palmer (1993) describes projection as an expression of education that conceives of the self and the world cut off from its transcendent source:

When education divorces self and world from their transcendent source, they become locked in an endless power struggle to create each other in their own image...The self creates the world by means of projection... If we can know only what is available to our senses and our logic, then reality is reduced to those narrow terms. (p. 12)

Dr. Cathy notes that projecting “seems to have a sense of pride or boasting, whereas revealing seems to have a sense of humility...being present in text alone makes it difficult to know when one is crossing the line...oftentimes there seems to be a gray zone where one crosses over from revealing to projecting.” Palmer (1993) suggests that much of the world’s violence is an acting-out of our inner demons by projecting them ‘out there’” (p. 12).

Deacon Jim explains how lectors are trained to read passages from Sacred Scripture at a Catholic Mass to communicate the transcendent presence of God in his word:

What we look for is not just a reading of the words...No, what we are looking for is lived experience. What we should hear in the proclamation of the reading is the living word. We should hear that the Scripture has meaning for the one proclaiming that it is alive in his or her heart...the living out of the reading by the reader should come across...

Nancy uses Deacon Jim’s explanation of the living word of God to explain another dimension of *reveal*—light reveals, she tells us, and Christ reveals himself as “The Light of the World.” Nancy thinks that we too are most transparent, most revealing, and most

present to each other in the online community when we are open to the “Light of the World” in our conversations that seek his face. Gayle adds that God would not have chosen to have his own word written if written text could not reveal his supernatural presence. She returns to the notion of relationship that is required for presence in text: “The revelation of the soul is an exchange that requires both the revelation and the reception...we need to trust the Holy Spirit to carry the weight of our text, as well, in our effort to reveal ourselves to one another.” Davin adds that our willingness to be vulnerable is a great testimony to others of the presence of God. Pat notes that we control projection but let go of control when we choose to reveal ourselves to others.

Davin warns that self-revelation must respect the appropriateness of the audience receiving the revelation or that too can become projection. He warns that we need to know ourselves well. He offers a simple test to avoid projection: “Ask yourself: ‘Why am I doing this? Is it for God or Davin?’” He adds that relationships take time, so one cannot reveal too much too quickly. Thinking about his wife, Davin recommends having a few people you trust give you feedback on a regular basis.

Online Communication is an Art

Writing well is integral to online communication because human presence depends on the construction of text. Our conversations jump from online text as a *con* to online text as an *art*. Davin calls our online conversation an art: “Online communication is an art.” He thinks short posts actually improve communication: “...for the most part my writing and thought process gets better as I edit and cut.” He also uses emoticons and complains, “There are a few people that I always seem to be shaking my head at as I read their posts.”

Robert Sokolowski (1978), a phenomenologist in the Husserlian tradition, notes the increasingly complex syntax when we move from speaking to writing:

The words now attract the eye as well as the ear; they engage our sensibility more thoroughly than they do in reporting and registration. Furthermore, our sentences can become still more elaborate...structure wins out over the substrate of sound...and can now stretch into sinuosities and involvements which would be impossible in speech (p. 7).

Davin's preference for brevity in posts suggests a poetic quality, an inverse proportion between the length of the text and the meaning it communicates: "Some use way too many words," Davin tells us. Van Manen (2003) speaks about the importance of silence in poetry and the language of phenomenology: "Certain meaning is better expressed through how one writes than in what one writes" (p. 131). He explains the connection between poetry and phenomenology: "Phenomenology is like poetry, in that it speaks partly through silence: it means more than it explicitly says" (p. 131). Davin tells us how much he has learned about online communication since he began in the early 1990's: "Some are very good at getting points across and you can even hear the sarcasm and humor through the words, while others can't ever get it, some are even rude...some use waaaaay too many words." Although Davin doesn't name silence as enriching brevity, his description of online communication as art hints at this phenomenon shared by poetry.

O'Donohue (1999) believes that poetry actually enhances presence, as Davin believes that shorter, more thoughtful posts enhance meaning in online communication. O'Donohue describes the relationship between poetry and presence:

Poems are some of the most amazing presences in the world. I am always amazed that poems are willing to lie down and sleep inside the flat, closed pages of books. If poems behaved according to their essence, they would be out dancing on the seashore or flying to the heavens or trying to rinse out secrets of the mountains...A poem can travel far into your depths to retrieve your neglected longing. (pp. 54-55)

I wonder if research studies have been conducted that correlate online communication with poetry, as online communication attempts to enhance the presence of a person who is present only in text.

Hewitt, Brett, and Peters (2007) recently studied the reading practice of scanning as a coping mechanism for long and numerous posts in asynchronous computer conferencing environments. For the purposes of their research, they define scanning as "...a term that refers to reading practices that are unlikely to result in deep comprehension" (p. 218). They propose the use of a scanning metric as a measure of anxiety at the length and volume of posts that students and instructors may be required to read online as an indication of a lack of deep understanding. Their study reveals that scanning increases with posting size, the status of the person doing the scanning, the status of the person whose note is being scanned, and the size and configuration of the online class. Davin is also a student in an online MBA program and confesses that he is a scanner: "In my marketing class, I have to read through thirty to forty posts a day. They aren't too long but they basically say the same thing. At that point, I become a scanner."

The root word for *scan* means leap or climb (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 2656). In what way does leaping and climbing help us to come to an understanding? Palmer (1993) compares speed reading of large texts to sacred reading called *lectio divina* where members of religious communities "dwell on a page or passage or line for hours and days at a time" (p. 76). Palmer tells us the significance of *lectio divina* for education: "This method allows reading to open, not fill, our learning space" (p. 76). Is Davin's preference for shorter posts suggesting that online conversation has its own structure, where brevity is an art? Does its syntax reflect the dynamic of poetry where the brevity of language leaves space for more meaning? Is the online text that mirrors our conversation more meaningful than our conversations because it reflects the art of

poetry? Is our editing of posts modeling the craft of the poet? Does the silence of presence in absence draw us in?

Heidegger (1953/1993c) argues for a relationship between technology and art: “There was a time when it was not technology alone that bore the name *technē*. There was a time when the bringing-forth of the true into the beautiful was called *technē*. The *poiēsis* of the fine arts was also called *technē*” (p. 339). John Paul II (2001) argues for authenticity in communicating the Gospel by avoiding a plethora of words in favor of the witness of charity: “...the proclamation of the Gospel...risks being misunderstood or submerged by the ocean of words which daily engulfs us in today’s society of mass communication. The charity of works ensures an unmistakable efficacy to the charity of words” (p. 67). Davin encourages the charity of editing as an expression of love from the online writer to the online reader. Heidegger suggests that our preoccupation with technology actually masks the “essential unfolding of technology as we no longer guard and preserve the essential unfolding of art. Yet, the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes” (p. 341). He describes the poetical as a quality of shining forth that is part of all dimensions of communication:

The poetical brings the true into the splendor of what Plato in the *Phaedrus* calls to *ekphanestaton*, that which shines forth most purely. The poetical thoroughly pervades every art, every revealing of essential unfolding into the beautiful. (p. 340)

Is he inviting us to let go of the instrumentality of technology and take up the art of online communication—as the giving of self in love—when we post? Gayle reminds us, “Posting is like giving of yourself. We may never know the full impact.”

Gadamer (1960/1999) describes the mode of being of art as presentation: “...For all encounter with the language of art is an encounter with an unfinished event and is itself part of this event” (p. 99). The essence of play in the work of art is understanding

and interpretation: "Understanding must be conceived as part of the event in which meaning occurs, the event in which the meaning...is formed and actualized" (pp. 164-165). Gadamer reminds us that the art of writing is not an end in itself, but is a means to understanding: "The art of writing, like the art of speaking, is not an end in itself and therefore not the fundamental object of hermeneutical effort" (p. 394). Does Davin find more room for play in the mind of reader and writer when online text is shorter? How do we learn the essence of electronic posting—length, emoticons, response time—to enhance understanding?

Gadamer (1960/1999) describes the ultimate goal of textual communication as the imparting of self to another: "But no text and no book speaks if it does not speak a language that reaches the other person" (p. 397). This is a hermeneutical process that each member of the online community participates in as conversation occurs online: "To understand [literature] does not mean primarily to reason one's way back into the past, but to have a present involvement in what is said. It is not really a relationship between persons...but about sharing in what the text shares with us" (p. 391). Text, as conversation, is about the relationship of persons who become present to one another through the presence of text.

Sokolowski (1994) describes the link between presence and absence in the play of interpretation: "Each kind of absence is correlated with a distinctive kind of presence and has its own way of being transformed into presence" (p. 195). Pat describes her experience of online presence in the absence of text: "There is still more to each of us than we can present online. The computer has let me meet you, and the presence we feel is a teaser to the kind of relationships we could have were we physically closer together."

The Call of Community

As a text-based research community exploring the phenomenon of presence, there is a consciousness of how language itself calls us to form bonds of community. Gadamer (1960/1999) addresses the communal dimension of communication in language similar to Marcel who understands presence as participation: “It must be emphasized that language has its true being only in dialogue, in coming to an understanding...For language is by nature the language of conversation; it fully realizes itself only in the process of coming to an understanding” (p. 446). He explains that despite differences in linguistic or historical traditions, “...it is always a human—i.e., verbally constituted—world that presents itself to us” (p. 447).

The dialogic dimension of language is reflected in the work of Swiss Catholic theologian, Hans Urs von Balthasar (1985/2000), who uses phenomenology to explore the transcendent manifestation of God’s presence in the world, as revealed in the mutuality of communication:

Truth now appears in the world as distributed among countless subjects, which in their original posture of readiness are open to one another and which await from one another the communication of the part of the truth that God has granted them as a share in his own infinite truth. (p. 55)

Von Balthasar describes the call of community as participation in the presence of God, when divine truth is communicated in human language and revealed through day-to-day events by those who are called to a relationship of communion with God and one another. Gadamer confirms this communal dimension of human experience: “It is clear that the life-world is always at the same time a communal world that involves being with other people as well. It is a world of persons...” (p. 247).

Von Balthasar’s (1985/2000) vision of divine Truth as reflected in the communication of each person within a community reflects the hermeneutical richness of conversation. Gadamer (1960/1999) reminds us that “...the discovery of the true

meaning of a text or a work of art is never finished; it is in fact an infinite process" (p. 297). Online conversation, as a distinctive form of human communication, has permanence akin to literature because it is text-based, not oral communication. The written transcript of participants in the online community becomes a mirror of their identity as a community, and invites them to a deeper search for understanding in language, a phenomenon that would be lost in the spoken word and the temporality of the moment.

Corporeality Breaks Through Us

In what way does the language of the online community reveal the corporeal presence of the body in text? We speak of the online community as disembodied presence, yet the body's presence is assumed and breaks through in the language of each personality. Max van Manen (2003) reminds us of the influence of corporeality on our judgment: "When we meet another person in his or her landscape or world we meet that person first of all through his or her body...Even if we learn about another person only indirectly (by letter, telephone, or book), we often already have formed a physical impression of the person which later may get confirmed or negated..." (p. 105). Dr. Cathy admits her mistaken judgments of corporeality as she visualizes what people look like through their text. Her imaging of human identity includes a bodily representation that the mind seems programmed to visualize, even in a community where abstract text is the fullness of physical presence. Van Manen's insight about corporeality may be what drives Gayle, Leo, and Deacon Jim to travel to Virginia to meet the CDU staff face-to-face.

Gadamer (1960/1999) describes the corporeality of language as the inner conversation that is elicited by written text. Although the medium of conversation in the online community is abstract symbols on a computer screen, the symbols hide real human activity and engagement, as the participants react to printed text in a passionate

search for meaning that forges bonds of human community. Gadamer explains:

“Meaning and the understanding of it are so closely connected with the corporeality of language that understanding always involves an inner speaking as well” (p. 160).

Leder (1990) describes how attitudes toward the body influence our cultural norms. He quotes Idhe’s (1983) comparison of navigation by Polynesians to the Western style of navigation. Westerners use highly intellectual disembodied forms of navigation with instruments and mathematical calculations, while Polynesians use embodied intelligence based on an animistic notion of the world. Leder then extrapolates to his own experience of using a word processor as evidence of mental activity divorced from bodily experience:

Our cultural belief in the disassociation of mind from body leads to an increase in dissociative practices; we are encouraged to abandon sensorimotor awareness for abstracted mathematical or linguistic forms. This in turn intensifies the day-to-day experience of mind as disembodied. ...As I sit here pursuing our socially sanctioned model of advanced intelligence—typing words on a computer screen—mind does seem like something disembodied indeed. (p. 153)

I wonder what we hide from ourselves and others about our relationship to our bodies in the life we live online that makes us comfortable to be present only in text. Sister Timothy Prokes (2004) describes the attraction and danger of online communication precisely because of what she calls the escape of “bodily scrutiny.” She writes, “Baldness, acne, and obesity are seemingly left behind in the messy world, and some champions of cyberspace dream of escaping entirely from the ballast of materiality or what one commentator has called the ‘cloddishness of the body’” (p. 119). The attraction of the virtual is the ability to “fashion, or re-fashion experience simultaneously in a variety of ways, or exterminate at will” (p. 118).

In educational settings, however, the purpose of online communication extends educational opportunities far beyond the reaches of a classroom; the very issue Sister Prokes raises, the escape of bodily scrutiny, becomes an advantage. The online

phenomenon minimizes or eliminates judgments based on physical appearance, age, or gender. Shyness is no longer a variable, and relationships between students and faculty are more participative than hierarchical, despite the acknowledgment by Dr. Cathy that she is aware of being a con in relationships with persons in authority. The motivation for those who choose computer-mediated education, based on the conversations of our research community, is a desire to access a particular type of education that is not geographically accessible, rather than a desire to avoid bodily realities. The desire for bodily realities is revealed in the research community as a continuum of those who prefer the face-to-face classroom to those who prefer presence in text. However, the question remains: What do we reveal about being present in distance without “bodily scrutiny?”

O’Donohue (2004) quotes St. Bernard of Clairvaux who suggests that the body reflects the inner state of the mind: “The body is an image of the mind, which, like an effulgent light scattering forth its rays, is diffused through its limbs and senses...” (p. 42). St. Bernard’s vision of the body as a reflection of the mind supports research findings reported by Walther (1996): “When social partners were not proximal, the salience of group membership became stronger yet” (p. 18). Learning to know one another in text first, may influence our judgments about the body. The online community that communicates initially through written text may experience more openness to bodily presence after getting to know one another in the presence of text.

The Catholic faith has been described as a religion of the body. Prokes (2004) claims that “The understanding of authentic presence is foundational to Catholic faith” (p. 69). Reverend Thomas Ryan, CSP, (2004) believes that British poet and Jesuit priest, Gerard Manley Hopkins, as a former Anglican, is drawn to the Catholic faith because of the Church’s insistence on God’s presence in the world as a bodily reality, as reflected in the Catholic understanding of sacraments:

God comes to us not in a purely spiritual and invisible way but rather through visible, concrete, tangible, earthy things and in the context of community...In becoming incarnate in Jesus of Nazareth, the Word in some way drew close not only to all humans, but to all creation, giving everything a deeper dignity and a more intimate relationship with God. (p. 6)

Hopkins (1844-1889) writes poetry with a distinctive embodied language charged with divine presence. In the poem, *God's Grandeur*, (1885) Hopkins describes the world and nature as embodying divine presence:

The world is charged with the grandeur of God.
It will flame out, like shining from shook foil;
It gathers to a greatness, like the ooze of oil
Crushed. Why do men then now not reckon his rod?

And, for all this, nature is never spent;
There lives the dearest freshness deep down things;
And though the last lights off the black West went
Oh, morning, at the brown brink eastward,
Spirits—

He concludes the poem with an embodied image of the Holy Spirit as a dove hovering over the world imbuing divine presence:

Because the Holy Ghost over the bent
World broods with warm breast and with ah! Bright
Wings. (Ryan, 2004, p. 57)

As I read Hopkins' poetry, I am called to wonder how the language of the online learning community also reveals divine presence in text. Ryan (2004) cites Catholic theologian, Karl Rahner, who describes the heart of human existence as the "transcendental existential: in our very existence we are turned toward the Transcendent. We are open outwards toward the Divine, hard-wired for communion with God" (pp. 4-5).

Life in Cyberspace

The beauty of being human is the capacity and desire for intimacy.
(O'Donohue, 1999, p. 11)

Literally, to cross the interface between persons, divine or human, is the ultimate call of every human being.
(Prokes, 2004, p. 74)

The CDU online research community has a distinctive identity as a faith community, which is part of their daily consciousness as students of theology. As they explore what draws them together as a community they inevitably acknowledge the importance of faith. Their conversations reveal the influence of faith on the formation of community and the struggle to live in a world, even within the family, that denies and ridicules their identity as persons grounded in the Christian faith.

The Richness is Human and Divine

Pat speaks about the lived experience of presence that is both human and divine: "There must be a deeper dimension to our sense of presence because we all share the same faith. To know that we will all be in heaven together is a binding thought. If we were a group of business people, would we be able to feel the same?"

Nancy agrees with Pat:

That we all share the same faith creates a spiritual communion and makes us soul-mates. Connectedness forms the mystical Body of Christ. It unites us even though we never meet face-to-face. The physical dimensions of our contact may be limited to the text we see on the screen, but our union is real. We share in common something which touches every aspect of our lives, our spirituality, and we might actually know each other better than we realize.

Lori responds that the study of theology which unites the members of the research community actually deepens the bond among them: "Neat to think of our connection being deeper and more real because of our topic—theology. What part does

the Holy Spirit play in all of this?" Gayle responds: "The Holy Spirit binds us together because of the topic...I missed the obvious element of God, the Holy Spirit. Theology makes transparency in posting much easier and fulfilling. I missed the truth of operating as One Body online in the study of God." Pat agrees: "I am absolutely convinced the Holy Spirit works in a special dimension when studying theology online. It is Christ in me that I am studying, not just facts. What a difference!"

Ryan (2004) describes all of matter as a visible reflection of the presence of God in the world: "Everything reflects something of the beauty and life-affirming energy of God. By both nature and grace we are sacraments for one another, visible signs and tangible expressions of the mystery that grounds and permeates all of life" (p. 6).

Sokolowski (1994) writes about the difference between pagan gods and the God of Christianity: "As Creator, the biblical God is more detached from the world than are the pagan gods, but he is also more immanent to it, since the world could not be except through his creative and concurrent power" (p. 203). The theology of disclosure is a phenomenological understanding of the world and our place in it.

The being of the Christian God brings with it a new presentational mode. The world and everything in it are now understood as capable of being seen from a new point of view, that of the transcendent Creator. (p. 204)

He describes the deepest part of the revelation of God in Sacred Scripture as "...not simply that God has done these things, but that he exists and that he is of such a nature that he can do them...The possibilities that the Scripture disclose are even more important than the facts they report and the commandments they enjoin" (p. 205).

Van Manen (2003) describes the existential of *lived other* as a way of transcendence: "As we meet the other we are able to develop a conversational relation which allows us to transcend our selves" (p. 105). Von Balthasar (2000) concurs: "Things are always more than themselves, and their constantly self-surpassing transcendence

opens ultimately onto an idea that is, not the things themselves, but God and their measure in God" (p. 59).

The Luxury of Time

In addition to the *lived other*, Van Manen (2003) describes three other existentials of life in the world: lived space, lived body, and lived time. Nancy is the first to mention the benefit of the "time-warp" of asynchronous interaction in the online campus at CDU. She refers to the ability to log on and participate in discussion twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. She lives in California and mentions how she actually has more time than East Coast students when there is a deadline because of the time difference between the coasts. She likes asynchronous time because it allows everyone in the learning community, from New Zealand to New York, to participate when it suits each best. Lori likes it because she can participate when it suits her best, not when it suits the professor or the school best. Irene says her time psychologically becomes the same time for everyone in the research community: "Logging on makes me feel as though we are all present at the time I am reading."

Gayle is an early morning person who likes to make her own schedule, so the "time-warp" appeals to her too. Leo believes asynchronous time makes his own time more useful because he schedules studying on his schedule, not someone else's. Nancy describes the "luxury of time" when she leaves her computer for a few hours to reflect before she responds to a question or assignment. Asynchronous time allows her to edit her responses as much as she needs before she posts them in a discussion area.

Van Manen (2003) points out that lived time includes the past, present and future: "The temporal dimensions of past, present, and future constitute the horizons of a person's temporal landscape" (p. 104). Nancy reminds the research community of the demands on time at a traditional university: "...lines to register, purchase a catalog, a

parking permit; lines to purchase or resell books, lunch lines, bathroom lines, library check-out lines; lines for parking, traffic on the freeway..."

Lori is fascinated with asynchronous time. She describes an online seminar where she logged on early the first day, thinking she would be one of the first to start: "There were already postings from Australia, Saudi Arabia, and Iraq! I felt such a connection to the world. We were able to be present to our military brother in Iraq, and the person in Saudi was actually attending the Church I had attended ten years earlier...the conversation feels ongoing. This technology offers world connections unforeseen."

Deacon Jim, an experienced online learner and expert computer user, points out the only negative, to asynchronous time, in his opinion: "The conversation can carry on without you. Conversations continue, develop new ideas, thoughts, and solutions without any particular person's presence." On the other hand, one can re-read all the postings and contribute something later to a previous topic. Irene describes asynchronous discussion as apparent "total chaos," but if, as Deacon Jim suggests, "you keep up with it, the discussion does sort itself out."

In the Comfort of Home

Comfort best describes the place where the members of our research community dwell when they log on to the CDU online campus from home. *Comfort* (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p.476) as a verb is French, combining *con*, which means *with* or *intensive*, and *fort* means strong. It means to strengthen morally or spiritually, to encourage, hearten, to inspire. The noun means strengthening, encouragement, incitement, aid, succor, support, countenance, a source of strength. It can also mean physical refreshment, sustenance, pleasure, enjoyment, delight, and gladness. It can also mean relief from mental stress, soothing, solace, a state of physical and material well-being, restfulness. Davin volunteers that he likes to sit at the computer wearing pajamas

early in the morning with a cup of coffee. Nancy volunteers that she doesn't have to shower or change clothes, even pajamas, to attend class. Lori acknowledges that she too likes to study in pajamas: "I find that funny and consoling. I am not the only one."

Although each home is unique, every home shares the quality of comfort. What does dwelling in this quality contribute to the online community when their life together is comfortable? In what way does it influence their presence in distance? O'Donohue (1999) believes that home provides a frame for experience. "All of human experience comes to expression in some kind of form or frame" (p. 70). He claims that "in order to be, we need to belong" (p. 71). When we are home, we can be ourselves and relax. He describes home as "the shelter that liberates creativity and spirituality" (p. 71). He describes home as an extension of the primary home of the body: "All belonging is an extension of the first and closest belonging of living in your own body" (p. 72). Our bodies are most relaxed in the comfort of home. What does the comfort of the body contribute to the meaning of our text, I wonder?

Dr. Cathy compares the atmosphere of home to the public library where she used to study online:

Home definitely enhances my online experience. Since I live alone I can work in brief snatches, day or night. My texts and course binders are handy. I can take food breaks, read the materials, dress in pajamas, relax in my La-Z-Boy chair. I am warm and cozy, sitting before the kitchen window. My own computer is familiar, faster, set to my preferences, and germ-free. I can work in silence or have the ballgame running on TV; compared to the library, this is paradise!

Nancy describes her lived space in cyberspace at home as "comfortable!" Van Manen (2003) talks about how home gives a sense of well-being: "Home has been described as that secure inner sanctity where we can feel protected and by ourselves (Bollnow, 1960; Heidegger, 1971). Home is where we can be what we are" (p. 102).

Marcel (1937/1951/1967) describes a country house that no longer exists, yet still holds a special presence. He compares it to a body that has died, yet the person is still very present to us in memory:

But is there a sense in which this house is a soul and survives? Without any doubt, will be my answer in as much as it has formed a certain *we* in which it is incorporated. It has contributed in founding an intimacy; but in return this intimacy raises it above the world of absolutely perishable things and consecrates it. (p. 194)

Marcel suggests that life in the home is a consecration that gives it a spiritual presence, an intimacy. *Intimacy* is Latin, meaning inmost, deepest, most profound in friendship. It is the state of pertaining to or being connected with the inmost nature or fundamental character of a thing; affecting one's inmost self (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 1470). The comfort of home is where we feel most relaxed and open to ourselves, revealing the deepest, most hidden qualities of who we are. Its intimacy surrounds us and infuses us with peace and security. What does this atmosphere of comfort contribute to our thinking and being as online learners? Heidegger (1951/1993d) connects dwelling to building and thinking. He proposes that our homelessness is not a shortage of houses but the inability to dwell:

The proper dwelling plight lies in this, that mortals ever search anew for the essence of dwelling, that they must ever learn to dwell. That if man's homelessness consisted in this, that man still does not even think of the proper plight of dwelling as the plight? Yet as soon as man gives thought to his homelessness, it is a misery no longer. Rightly considered and kept well in mind, it is the sole summons that calls mortals into their dwelling. (p. 363)

Irene describes how, as a mother studying at home, she influences her children by introducing her teenagers to major religious texts such as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* and the *Documents of Vatican II*. They see their mother for the first time as an adult learner, demonstrating the joy and struggle of middle-aged students pursuing lifelong learning. Irene admits taking her laptop to McDonalds when their wireless

network is down at home. She confesses to the influence of the home: the flexibility of the laptop carries distractions from room to room—laundry, dishes, and conversations with children: “Studying and working at home requires discipline,” Irene reminds us.

Nancy adds that she likes to use her computer in a space at home where she is alone without distractions. Dr. Cathy’s experience at the public library confirms this. She describes a one-hour time limit, exposure to sick people, annoying features to disable, slow speeds, and distracting patrons. Nancy comments, “At home distractions are more easily controlled...A familiar room has fewer distractions and allows attention directed to the computer that is ever changing.”

Several members of the research community like working in or near the kitchen. Leo and Dr. Cathy mention the comfort of food breaks. Dr. Cathy has stored up wonderful memories from the kitchen: “We always gathered in the kitchen...It’s in the kitchen that I have such wonderful memories of shared meals with my mother...” Gayle finds no disadvantages in working from home: “Online and at home keeps me fresh and able to work at my peak performance.” Everyone agrees that the cyberspace classroom is comfortable. As Nancy says, “Overall, the cyberspace classroom in the comfort of home is...comfortable.” At CDU the cyberspace classroom becomes a place to gather through text, yet the reality of dwelling at home contributes comfort and ease. For some, it becomes difficult to enforce the discipline of intellectual thought in a place where we dwell in comfort and space is shared. Online students need to consider their relationship to lived space. The research community finds it an advantage for mind to dwell in a body that is relaxed and comfortable.

Life in a Web

Lori thoughtfully reflects on the meaning of lived space in cyberspace. She imagines a web that connects us: “It is spiritual, touching the part of each other that is eternal.” She reaches for theological terms to complete her description—“the Body of

Christ—maybe we meet in Christ.” Her metaphor is welcomed by Davin who thinks it describes well a diagram he saw in a textbook of how the Internet works. Gayle, as a morning person, loves learning through the Internet, as compared to her former experience of attending classes away from home at night. With so many of the research group attending class in pajamas, she suggests we avoid the Logitech audio/cam that would enable us to see each other on our computer screens. Davin challenges Gayle’s negative assessment of her introverted personality in traditional class discussions: “Some of the best discussions I have participated in, I didn’t say a word.”

Leo offers the metaphor of a bubble to describe the essence of our research community—“We are cyber bubbles...I see the world as bubbles...as we interact our bubbles touch and cluster together, allowing grace and knowledge to flow from one bubble to another.” Lori notes that bubbles are free to float anywhere and can touch.

Deacon Jim moves away from metaphors to describe the real demands that distance education makes on the learner. Everyone agrees that it requires more work and motivation than traditional education. Dr. Cathy emphasizes how well asynchronous time works in the study of theology because it offers the luxury of reflection. Irene agrees that she needs time to reflect when the topic is theology. Dr. Cathy adds that there is equality in discussion at CDU where clergy and religious, as students and faculty, interact with the laity equally as part of the student body. She notes the equality of participation with faculty that never occurred at Case Western Reserve, where she was an undergraduate.

Irene describes the closing of parishes in her diocese in Ohio and the outrage of parishioners, as an example of how attached we become to lived place. Pat thinks online learning is a modern solution to the traditional attachment to place, as the Church must respond to the shortage of priests and an increasingly transient population.

Davin claims the reality of *lived space* even in a cyberspace campus by noting changes in his writing style as he moves among virtual rooms in the CDU Online

Campus. His writing style changes, reflecting the purpose and atmosphere of the Chapel, the Café, or the classroom. He is informal in the Café, but careful and precise with text in the online classroom.

Dr. Cathy confesses that she looks forward to logging on daily to the online campus: “I find it exciting...it eases my loneliness and isolation.” They both give evidence that cyberspace does become a real place of anticipation that connects with emotions and offers a sense of security, like home. Van Manen (2003) suggests that we actually become the space in which we dwell: “In general, we may say that we become the space we are in” (p. 102).

Lurkers

One technical feature of the conferencing software is lurking—being able to read what others have posted without being “seen” in the cyberspace campus. Nancy confesses lurking: “Did anyone know I’ve been present and listening until I typed?” Two co-researchers who disdain online discussion as a graded academic requirement admit to being lurkers. Dr. Cathy describes her lurking behavior by quoting television persona, Dr. Fraser Crane: “I’m listening.” Both Dr. Cathy and Gayle acknowledge their preference for reading what other learners post before committing themselves to text. Lurking leads Dr. Cathy to start a new threaded discussion: “I wonder if I have a CDU self? I recognize that I present myself differently to each of my friends.” While Davin admits that his text is influenced by *lived space*, Dr. Cathy’s lurking behavior suggests that her text is influenced by *lived other*.

Deacon Jim notes an irony about distance education—that our technologically-mediated learning community actually demands more real world experience to succeed than adults in traditional face-to-face programs. In his view,

[We are] ...closer to the real world than our brothers and sisters in traditional classes. With distance learning we are required as learners to have much more

initiative and drive for the learning process. We are more on our own...Is that because we want it more?

Gayle explains the benefits of online learning according to her experience with face-to-face versus online catechist training in the Archdiocese of New York:

The online formation gives people a forum to hash it out after really ingesting the material for themselves...The online courses I have taken are far more challenging than listening to a professor drone on for an hour twice a week and memorizing enough to regurgitate it on an exam.

Lori and Nancy discover readings from the New Testament that describe the lived experience of our online research community: "The Kingdom of heaven is like a net..." (Mt. 13:47) and from the Acts of the Apostles: "And the multitude of them that believed were of one heart and of one soul" (Acts 4:32).

Text as Presence

...under the objective materiality of a text which is there for everyone, there can lie hidden hierarchies of meaning which are successively revealed to the reader, provided he is endowed with a sufficient power of penetration.
(Marcel, 1937/1951/1967, p. 19)

...it would be wrong to imagine that determining what is truly meant by the living language of men is an easily mastered task. On the contrary, there is much evidence that it is virtually impossible to exhaust the wealth of meanings in words, especially root words, and to paraphrase them precisely.
(Pieper, 1986/1992, p. 19-20)

Being that can be understood is language.
(Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 474)

Text calls us to understanding. Heidegger (1959/1971), in an essay, *The Nature of Language*, proposes to become "mindful of language and our relation to it" (p. 58). He suggests that if "Man finds the proper abode of his existence in language—whether he is aware of it or not—an experience with language will touch the innermost nexus of

our existence" (p. 57). He reflects in particular on the meaning of the last line of a poem by Stefan George, entitled *The Word*: "Where word breaks off no thing may be."

Heidegger believes this line expresses his claim that "language is the house of Being" (p. 63):

...the poet has experienced that only the word makes a thing appear as the thing it is, and thus lets it be present. The word avows itself to the poet as that which holds and sustains a thing in its being...the poet experiences his poetic calling as a call to the word as the source, the bourn of Being. (p. 66)

Heidegger explains the relationship of a word to what it is—a thing. He describes the poet as one who "obtains entrance into the relation of word to thing. ...The word itself is the relation which in each instance retains the thing within itself in such a manner that it 'is' a thing" (p. 66). If we become present to each other in our text, is the presence of God in us also present in our text?

God's Presence in Text

Gayle reminds us that the spoken word of God was not enough: "And God said," was not sufficient in his relationship with his people. From Exodus to Revelation, God commands his people to write. Examples that support Gayle's argument include the *Book of Exodus*, when God tells Moses: "Put these words in writing, for they are the terms of the covenant which I have made with you and with Israel" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, 34:27). And in the *Book of Proverbs*, God says, "Let faithful love and constancy never leave you: tie them round your neck, write them on the tablet of your heart" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, 3:3). In the *Book of Jeremiah*, God tells the prophet: "Write for yourself in a book all the words I have spoken to you" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, 30:3). And from St. John in the New Testament *Book of Revelation* Christ tells him, "Now write down all that you see of present happenings and what is still to come" (*New Jerusalem Bible*, 1:19).

God chose to reveal his presence in written text as well as in the spoken word. Gayle adds, "There is equal power in God's spoken word, his living word, and his written word." Her response reflects a Catholic understanding of Revelation as presented in the Second Vatican Council's (1965) *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation, Dei Verbum*. Revelation is the spoken word of God known as Sacred Tradition, the written word of God as Sacred Scripture, and the living word of God as the "living teaching office of the Church," (p. 8). It authentically interprets the word of God as proclaimed by the Pope in union with the Bishops of the Church "whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ" (p. 8):

This plan of revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them. (pp. 3-4)

Words, as text, have power. Lori quotes Maya Angelou: "Words give life and presence." Maya tells Oprah Winfrey in a television interview that she does not allow anyone to speak words of anger or negativity in her home because of the power of language. Lori confirms the wisdom of Maya Angelou by reminding us that Jesus Christ is the Word of God: "When God speaks, we have life, we have the Word...Jesus is the Word, and we are text to each other...there is so much here to reflect on...text is presence."

Pope Benedict XVI (2007a) writes in the introduction of a new book, *Jesus of Nazareth*, about the transcendent power of words used to communicate faith: "When a word transcends the moment in which it is spoken, it carries within itself a 'deeper value.' This deeper value pertains most of all to words that have matured in the course of faith-history" (pp. xix-xx).

Presence as Pain

In the online research community, presence is also experienced as pain. Pat talks about competitiveness as proof of presence: “Competitiveness is another sign of presence. We let ourselves be so influenced by someone who has a tick about being the best...We don’t seem to be able to turn it off, like TV.” She believes the reality of competitiveness at an online distance university attests to the real connection among the students. “We do react to their behavior—perhaps more real than virtual.”

Competitiveness strikes a deep and common chord among some of the women in the research community. I am reminded of what happens when “destining reigns in the mode of enframing,” according to Heidegger (1953/1993c) in *The Question Concerning Technology*. “As a destining, it banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing” (p. 332). The response of the women in the research community is strong and angry. Lori comments:

I felt humiliated and trivialized in front of my classmates. Online discussion became superficial. Unable to talk about anything mildly controversial. I was disappointed...competitiveness...this shows itself in the discussions when people seem to be talking at each other instead of responding thoughtfully...spouting knowledge.

Palmer (1993) believes that competitiveness originates in an educational philosophy that is anti-communal:

Students are made to compete with one another as a hedge against error, so that only the fittest and smartest will survive...we become manipulators of each other and the world rather than mutually responsible participants and co-creators. (p. 37)

Gayle finds the presence of “destining as ordering” in the Church: “Sometimes in life I have found that the Church can be the most dangerous place to be. Many a saint has suffered the ire of fellow Christians.” O’Donohue (1999) reminds us, “Words form

our minds, and we can only see ourselves and the world through the lenses of words” (p. 253). Davin, sensing real pain, dons his referee uniform and reminds the group that he, too, is very competitive but always and implicitly with himself: “Do I try to follow Christ and do my best for him?” he asks. Sokolowski (1994) describes the dynamic of presence and absence in our life with God and the intense pain it causes:

God’s grandeur is at times present in his actions for his people, but it also conceals itself with a kind of absence that is like no other deprivation: the presence of God makes the loss of God possible; grace brings the possibility of refusal. The abandonment of Christ on the cross is the extreme form of this divine hiddenness. (p. 206)

The dynamic of presence and absence in the behavior of others—faculty and students—causes real pain, even when presence is technologically-mediated. The women enumerate those who compete at the cost of other students’ embarrassment, and the insensitivity of the teacher who publicly criticizes students in online discussion, the teacher who ignores the value of equality of participation over the brilliance of some. Acknowledgment of pain requires trust; no one else in the online research community comments.

Presence is Relationship

Nancy believes that presence is enhanced when online communication reveals personal relationships that exist between the writer and the reader prior to exchanging text online:

The impact of presence may also involve the relationship that exists between the writer and the reader...reading something written by someone we have already met becomes more animated in the mind...reading text written by someone we have never ‘met’ may have less impact. Online communication requires a longer time for people to become acquainted because there is an absence of the visual and audio clues we are accustomed to rely upon.

Gayle, on the other hand, prefers to create relationships online through text, not as a result of a prior face-to-face relationship:

I believe what draws us in to online text is the unfolding of persons and events, the development of a relationship with people through the text...those who are attracted to online learning assimilate the person behind the text; it is not just ink on paper.

Lori agrees with Gayle that presence involves a relationship of writing and reading: "Maybe we allow others to be present to us by how attentively we read." She highlights the relationship between the writer and the reader—the relationship that grows in the play between reading and writing. Gadamer (1960/1999) tells us: "Hermeneutics must start from the position that a person seeking to understand something has a bond to the subject matter that comes into language..." (p. 295). Presence is communal, I believe. To be present to one another in text, we are both writers and readers.

Gabriel Marcel (1937/1951/1967) uncovers the dynamic between reading and writing in hermeneutical interpretation by using the example of a conductor reading a musical score. The composer has a clear image of the musical composition, but the conductor, who has not heard the composer play the music, interprets the signs and symbols of the musical score according to his own talents and genius:

But the one who reads or performs it, being by definition deprived of this preliminary knowledge, can count only on himself, on his own power of sympathetic intuition. It will be necessary for him to surrender himself, to open himself to this mystery of which he has before him only a meager sensible and objective outline. But this creative interpretation toward which he tends is an effective participation in the very inspiration of the composer. (p. 20)

He suggests that a similar dynamic occurs when any text is read. In fact he likens it to philosophical inquiry: "What is true of the reading of a text applies almost exactly to the philosophical search as I understand it. It is in reality an interpretation" (p. 19).

Presence in the text of the online learning community depends on the gifts of writer and reader, as the reader practices the activity of interpretation of the writer's text.

Reading and Writing to Presence

One of the questions posed to the research community is comfort with writing. While the body is invisible to the online community, written text becomes the visible presence of each person. What is the relationship of the online learner to the skill of creating written text? Davin describes himself as someone who loves to read and visit museums. He reports that he knows how an author feels when he reads a book and remembers crying as a child when he had to leave a Civil War Museum. He believes that writing is essential for learning. Writing essays helps him learn; in the last eleven years he has been writing articles and is published in a well-known Catholic monthly journal called *The Word Among Us*. He also writes a weekly email newsletter called *Mary Mail* and has a blog.

Dr. Cathy confesses a love for reading, which has fed her love of writing. She prefers email to the telephone. She keeps a diary: "I can much better express my thoughts and emotions in writing." Now composing all her writing on the computer, she believes that keyboarding is "priceless."

Gayle loves to write too: "I am more accurate in text. I have the luxury of time and thought to reveal myself as succinctly and thoroughly as possible." She quotes Sacred Scripture to explain that text is a "window to her being": "For out of the abundance of the heart his mouth speaks" (*New Testament and the Psalms*, Luke 6:45). She believes there is a greater responsibility for the textual learner in an online class than an aural learner in a traditional class: "The written word is immortalized and cannot be retracted. The spoken word can be contested, as to what was really said...The written word is the documentation. Hence I feel a greater responsibility to craft my words authentically if my goal is honest disclosure." For this reason, Gayle believes that writing increases her vulnerability.

Deacon Jim thinks the great advantage of online discussion is the transcript of postings that allows him to re-read what was said, before he makes a contribution. He, too, implies the power of the written word and the relationship of writing and reading in the presence of text. The permanence of the computer-mediated transcript and the “luxury of time” provide a space for presence to expand.

Lori admits she loves to write for prayer and journaling: “Writing helps create an open place to be present to God in prayer.” Yet, she freezes at the prospect of academic writing. Nancy agrees that writing does not come easily or naturally for her. Pat, too, is more comfortable speaking than writing. She attributes this to her spoken language facility in English, French, and German and the challenge of writing in three different languages. She admits that writing forces her to be concise: “A good speaker should at heart be a good writer, but a good writer is not necessarily a good speaker.”

Honing Presence through Software

For most of the research community, the edit feature of the software, as writers of text, is equivalent to the artist’s palette or the sculptor’s chisel. Davin and Deacon Jim admit that they frequently use the word processor to compose their posts because of the spelling and grammar-checking features, then cut and paste posts into the dialogue box to ensure that spelling and sentence structure are correct, which saves embarrassment. Leo admits that he was nervous about posting entries at first, but discovers that classmates are not shy about asking for clarification and are always charitable if they disagree. Nancy comments, “...the edit button works so well for me because I often have difficulty expressing my thoughts clearly and concisely.” Gayle calls the editing feature “a gift. It enables me to hone my disclosure.” Whether writing comes easily or not, everyone loves to edit, especially in a field like theology that requires time and reflection.

Exploring the Depths of Presence

Debbie reminds the online research community that the presence of Christ is a personal experience, mediated through persons: “We contemplate the face of Christ most completely in other persons because persons are made in God’s image and likeness.” In the online community she believes our presence is further mediated through the computer as text that may include graphics and sound. The further mediation of the computer is less complete for her than a face-to-face encounter.

Gayle who is recovering from Lasik surgery challenges Debbie. She uses the example of her blurred vision to demonstrate her point. Her vision is blurred and because of that she relates to her husband in ways other than visual, yet she knows and trusts his presence as much as when her vision is clear. Blind and deaf persons develop other senses more acutely to compensate for their loss as they assimilate the presence of other people. She believes that no matter the vehicle, such as a computer, or disability, the Holy Spirit makes Christ present to those with faith. “It is the Spirit of Christ in us that recognizes the face of Christ in the vehicle we use.” She quotes St. Paul who describes faith as seeing “in a mirror dimly” (*New Testament and the Psalms*, 1 CO 13:12). She believes this includes all encounters with Christ in all the variety of mediations, including the computer:

Mother Teresa saw Christ in the face of the poor; for some it is beholding a mountain vista or the ocean, and for our experience online it is in text, which is only as handicapped in revealing the face of Christ as any other medium.

In his poem, *As Kingfishers Catch Fire*, Gerard Manley Hopkins (1889/2004) expresses the same spiritual reality that God sees his divine Son reflected in each human person:

I say more: the just man justices;
Keeps grace: that keeps all his goings graces;
Acts in God’s eye what in God’s eye he is—

Christ. For Christ plays in ten thousand places,
Lovely in limbs, and lovely in eyes not his
To the Father through the features of men's faces. (Ryan, 2004, p. 55)

Davin agrees with Gayle and admits that Christ was there in the online campus all along, but he had not "seen" him until recently because of our discussions. He believes his "lens" has changed. Dr. Cathy believes the gathering of the CDU community online makes Christ present. "At CDU the text reflects the presence of students who thirst for the Lord and who desire to make a difference in this world..."

Dr. Cathy shares the insights of her moral theology professor, Father Torracco, who reflects on the difficulty that Christ must have had in communicating in human terms, both linguistic and actual, the supernatural love of his Father God. Dr. Cathy asks, "How is mystery translated? Human language is inadequate. Can written text reveal the soul? Perhaps this is why God chooses to present his word in Sacred Scripture through human authors inspired by the Holy Spirit." Ryan (2004) claims that the Catholic understanding of human life is mystical; "...*mystery* in the New Testament comes from the Greek *mysterion* and refers to the hidden presence of God and Christ in the scriptures, the sacraments, and the events of daily life" (p. 4).

Debbie responds after reading the postings of the research community: "I now know from your responses how the Holy Spirit is present when we are communicating online. It is through God's grace in the hearts of the persons reading and writing. The Holy Spirit is revealed when the message is the Truth. He directly inspires us to recognize when the message comes from Jesus through the words of another person." Dr. Cathy adds that the mission of Jesus was to translate the supernatural love of his Father into human language, into a human story: "The night of his death Jesus Christ fell in love with his Father, with a human heart. The translation took the form of self-giving, trust, obedience, and death." Davin breaks the tension, having returned from a weekend in Austin with his wife serving as counselors for married couples in crisis. He

asks if Christ, as the Word, is in fact the first distance educator. "The Word even transcends the distance of time," Davin notes.

We are Presence Poor

As we continue our computer-mediated conversations on human presence in computer-mediated technology, Lori reflects on presence in our day-to-day, face-to-face world. For her the world is presence poor: "We long for presence. We have become so busy that people have difficulty being fully present to each other...Most of our society is starved for presence and lonely."

Davin, as a college professor, describes how he tries to be present to his face-to-face classes by giving each of his students his undivided attention during office hours to communicate that people are his highest priority: "I want to be completely present," he tells us, even when he has classes to prepare and classes to study for.

Canadian philosopher and phenomenologist, Kenneth L. Schmitz (2005), in *The Recovery of Wonder*, writes about the loss of the "thingness" (Heidegger, 1954; 1962, p. 15) of things in our world today, that could also be described as a loss of presence:

My argument is that the ground of a new hope must pass through nature and nature's things; for that hope is grounded in a recognition of a certain transcendence in things that carries us beyond ourselves...The proposal, then, is a call to thoughtful conversion through an approach to the world about us that responds to it as a gift and not simply as a given. (p. xiii)

Prokes (2004) suggests that "Real space and place are not indifferent aspects of human existence. They have enduring significance, as does integrity of the real person expressed bodily in space and time" (p. 134).

Lori reminds us that physical proximity is not presence: "Even if one is physically present, it does not automatically mean presence." For her, presence is a selfless act: it is listening, setting ourselves aside for others. She wonders if the online format actually enhances presence because without attending to the text, which takes

more effort, we don't communicate at all. Like Irene, she believes that choosing to reveal small details of our personal lives is important when we live online without visible embodiment. "It helps to create an online persona." Irene adds that because the community is global and much more diverse, we need "snippets in text that reveal parts of ourselves...that offer a frame of reference for our contributions." Irene's comment supports O'Donohue's (1999) claim that "...we always need a frame around an experience in order to feel and live it" (p. 70).

Lori wonders: "Maybe we build our online personas differently...we must learn to be authentic in a different way through conscious self-revelation." Reflecting on the poetry of Emily Dickinson, she comments: "I think online presence reaches to the depths of personality, rather than getting caught up in the superficial physical qualities. Online we transcend space and time—so similar to the nature of faith."

Nancy admits that text alone is not presence enough for her. Davin lists what enhances and detracts online presence for him: "Presence grows with humor in posts, not taking oneself too seriously, asking good questions, honesty, revealing a personal side, responding from a personal viewpoint, short, easy-to-read posts. The opposite detracts from online presence: long, wordy posts, thoughtless questions, consecutive posts by the same person, and using all caps." Lori and Nancy agree that immediate feedback online enhances presence.

Dr. Cathy believes technology contributes to our presence-poor society. She lists Caller ID, voicemail, computerized, menu-driven phone systems. She questions how one makes contact with God, as German philosopher, Josef Pieper, suggests—through the inner peace and quiet of one's soul—with the constant relentlessness of cell phones, iPods, iPhones, MP3players and more. Dr. Cathy comments, "Many times online I feel like I am dealing with cardboard cutouts of people. I have no depth of information about each person whom I encounter. It is difficult to establish a relationship by understanding what and how to share myself."

Leo likes the anonymity of text. He prefers not to look at photos of his instructors because he likes to create his own images from their text. Before classes started, Leo cruised the online campus Chapel and Café; delightfully he met the Dean of Students and several CDU students chatting informally in the Café before classes started. Today he checks the Chapel and Café nearly every day to keep up the friendships. “If I get behind, I feel I have missed something.”

Online Presence: Asynchronous or Instant?

Although the research community lives in an asynchronous world online, Deacon Jim shares his currency with California culture. He distinguishes presence in the asynchronous CDU community from instant communication preferred by “youth and *technorati*.” *Technorati* is defined as a portmanteau pointing to the technological version of literati or intellectuals (Wikipedia, 2006), who define presence as instant communication. Communication can be text-based, voice, video conference, as long as it is immediate and immanent; presence is very current and real-time. Online synchronous presence has become the popular method of communication for business and pleasure.

Gayle links this type of instant communication to fast food which expedites business but “lacks the richness of developing presence.” She describes it as the difference between staying in touch or sharing an embrace: “Our 21st century communication habits are settling for a touch instead of an embrace. CDU allows for much deeper reflection and true presence because it is not rapid fire communication.”

Deacon Jim agrees with Leder’s (1990) assessment that technology is a two-edged sword. There are many advantages to online learning—communicating over great distances, avoiding restrictions of time, communicating beyond the barriers of class, race, gender—but the deficiency we feel is missing our faces in communication, the human elements of looking into each other’s eyes, seeing body motions and

mannerisms. Yet Deacon Jim asks, “Would we be as free and open if we were face-to-face? Would we have as much opportunity and equality?”

Nancy, who speaks slowly and likes to take her time reflecting, adds that online learning ensures that she will not be interrupted: “I am allowed to express a thought completely—no matter how long it takes—without the listeners commenting, finishing my sentence, interjecting, responding prematurely, or becoming impatient with me.” She reminds us that if there is a misunderstanding, the transcript is there to clarify. She concludes, “When we know our words are being read, we know we are being heard.” The equality of participation she describes enhances presence.

Computer-mediated Transformation

Two members of the online research community are converts: Gayle and Davin. Davin describes his faith journey into the Catholic Church as primarily text-based and online. Davin tells us, “I basically read my way into the Catholic Church and much of that happened on websites like EWTN and Catholic Answers. I met a wonderful priest online who answered my questions and prayed for me.” He goes on, “The Internet opened up the world to me—and CDU is part of that world—but it is not the only place where I learn; I learn on every webpage I open.” Heidegger (1959/1971) describes thinking in a way that mirrors Davin’s reflective online journey with language that led to the Catholic Church: “Thinking is not a means to gain knowledge. Thinking cuts furrows into the soil of Being” (p. 70). Davin’s encounter with computer-mediated text confirms the truth of the transformation of his being as a Catholic.

Gayle admits that she, too, read her way into the Catholic Church, although her journey began before she owned a computer. However, now that she has a computer she agrees with Davin: “My learning online continues to transform my life by developing my Catholic faith. God continues to use that conduit of grace on the Internet.”

Lori, as a cradle Catholic, reflects on her own faith journey. She agrees that God has formed her also through words. For her, the experience of presence online is an encouragement: "Presence online has acted more as an encouraging factor in the transforming process. I see others experiencing personal growth, working through difficulties...I know I am not alone." On further reflection, Lori adds: "I have been touched deeply by each of you being willing to share your journeys...a spiritual touching online. Touching one another does transform. I take away your thoughts and experiences and they become part of my journey. Thanks."

Nancy, who still believes the traditional face-to-face encounter is potentially more transforming than the text-based online encounter for her ("I really need to see and hear a person to experience 'presence'"), confesses that it is actually easier to share deeply personal, spiritual insights online for someone as emotional as she is. She is Latin and admits that she gets teary-eyed picking out a Mother's Day card or sympathy card in a Hallmark store: "Sharing spiritual and deeply personal experiences is not easily done in the physical presence of another...While sharing online, we can reveal our hearts without revealing the outward manifestations of our emotions...spiritual intimacy is more easily attained online."

Debbie, who also favors face-to-face communication, shares insights about online presence that have come recently to her from our discussions. On the one hand, she describes a relationship with a member of her family where no word needs to be exchanged to communicate deeply: "We can communicate silently." On the other hand, she admits that sometimes face-to-face communication is so difficult that she chooses to write rather than speak. She remembers another benefit to the online communication—permanence: "I guess you can say one advantage of online presence is its timelessness. When you communicate face-to-face, it is over after it happens, except for the memory. The written word endures."

Dr. Cathy believes that online presence at CDU is real and life-changing. She compares it to her experience as an undergraduate at Case Western Reserve University many years earlier:

The CDU instructors have a real presence that was never felt face-to-face at Case. I can focus now better as an adult in the comfort of home. In the college campus of my youth I was burdened with homesickness, immaturity, indecision...Case Western Reserve was a large urban university with no personal touch.

Dr. Cathy shares Alfred Lord Tennyson's poem, *Ulysses*, as the best way to express how she has been transformed by the online learning community:

I cannot rest from travel: I will drink
Life to the lees: all times I have enjoy'd
Greatly, have suffer'd greatly, both with those
That loved me, and alone; on shore, and when
Thro scudding drifts the rainy Hyades
Vest the dim sea:

I am part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and for ever when I move.
How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use! (as posted)

Dr. Cathy explains: "Ulysses longs for more adventures, which transform his very being. In similar manner, as I travel through CDU online, the world opens to me, and I become transformed for the better by the teachings, thoughts, and ideas of my teachers and fellow students. This transformation is one of conformity to Christ."

Pat, busy with running a Vacation Bible School in Germany, responds to Dr. Cathy and the online research community by explaining how they feed and support her intellectually and spiritually:

Your presence is very important to me. Surrounded by those who cannot share on the same level makes this online form of communication even more essential

to enhance my growth. We cannot always be giving and not get fed ourselves. [You] are food for me. (Yes, it is more than just a donut too! :)

She too believes the face-to-face encounter must be preferred: "I lack the faces!"

However, she agrees with Debbie and Nancy that the more anonymous milieu online makes communication easier. She agrees that time is no longer a problem either, "since we log on at any time."

Nancy believes that the plusses outweigh the minuses in online communication. She offers a definition of presence: "a supernatural spirit that is felt to be nearby." She agrees that discussing theology online at CDU, "There is a sense of closeness that exists despite distance or medium." Debbie agrees that online theology is real and effective, but she uses online technology because "it extends my ability to be in communication (in presence) more than if I didn't have it." She still prefers to be face-to-face, if possible. She responds to Deacon Jim's explanation of how he and his wife use technology to stay in touch when she is at the hospital: "Deacon Jim, wouldn't you much prefer to have your wife physically present?"

Deacon Jim responds to Debbie. Yes, he would prefer to have his wife fully present with him, he says, but he would not deny her being true to the person she is: "My wife is a healer, a doctor. That means that she is in the hospital for long hours right now. If she denied herself and stopped being a healer, we would both be less happy."

Life in Community

There are ties which are no burden, but which leave intact a certain liberty of life. (Marcel, 1937/1951/1967, p. 183)

All written works have a profound community... (Gadamer, 1960/1999, p. 163)

CDU's student body is global, and its learning communities are geographically spread among the five continents, yet united by language and faith. Most of the adult

learners are North American, spanning from ocean to ocean, and representing most of the nearly 200 US dioceses. Among the members of the research community, the geographical spread is reminiscent of Christ's final command in the Gospels to "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations," (*New Testament and the Psalms*, Mt 28:19). Davin compares CDU to the early Church community that was being prepared for a persecution that providentially spread the Christian faith beyond Rome to the borders of the civilized world. Davin wonders in text: "What is God preparing us for?"

Dr. Cathy describes CDU as having a spirit of communion like the Church herself, a recognized academic hierarchy of faculty and students, a mission ordered to the Church's mission of evangelization, and directed by the successors to the Apostles, the Bishops [The President of CDU is a Bishop]. She also acknowledges the tenuousness of being part of a community held together only by an invisible net. "The members of this community," she says, "do not share the sacraments directly with each other. I miss the personal touch of being able to attend Mass together, then gathering as a community after Mass as we frequently do in the social hall at my parish. I am sad that I very likely will never meet anyone in our community face-to-face."

There are compensations. She mentions the joy of meeting like-minded adults who thirst for a depth of knowledge of God that is not evident at her parish:

At CDU I have found a community of bright and eager scholars who are wholeheartedly embracing the faith. I am strengthened by all members of the community as I witness their fine examples of selfless service to God and their thirst to grow in knowledge. The CDU community guides me in my studies and opens doors to knowledge, spirituality, and self-discipline that I never would have discovered on my own.

Nancy emphasizes her appreciation for the freedom to openly discuss her faith without hesitation: "For me it has fulfilled that 'longing to belong' to a like-minded faith community, one which is not often or easily identified even in one's own parish." Gayle and Dr. Cathy view CDU as part of God's plan to spread the Faith to the ends of the

earth. Gayle comments, "...CDU is participating in the extraordinary catholicity of the Great Commission with the technology of the twenty-first century." Dr. Cathy adds, "CDU certainly has a similar present-day mission of elevating the global community of faith to a higher level."

Davin is struck by the historical coincidence of being married only a few weeks before CDU was established in 1983. He likes thinking of CDU as historically parallel to his marriage: "It is amazing what God can do in such a short time!" he says. He describes the essence of his CDU relationships online as similar to his relationship with his deceased grandfathers who died before he was born; he is told by family members that he resembles them in looks, laughter, and mannerisms. He explains: "Like my CDU relationships, even though I have not met my grandfathers face-to-face, I feel like I know them in some way; there are times I can sense their presence and other loved ones who have died."

I am Changed

Gayle turns to etymology to explain how the CDU community is transformed. The word in Sacred Scripture used to mean *transform* from St. Paul's passage in his Letter to the Romans ("be transformed by the renewal of your mind" [*New Testament and the Psalms*, Romans 12:2]) is *metamorphoo*. Two other places in the New Testament where this word appears refer to *transfiguration* (*New Testament and the Psalms*, Lk 9:28; II CO 3:18). Gayle tells the research community her interpretation of the etymology: "Though we cannot see each other face-to-face in our cyber community, we do through text behold with unveiled face the glory of the Lord in forming our minds with the truths of the Church that transform our heart and will."

Nancy and Pat acknowledge their agreement by typing *Ditto*. Gayle reminds the community that *Ditto* is an outmoded expression, as we no longer use Ditto machines;

online we *cut and paste*. Despite her correction, *ditto* remains part of the lexicon of the research community.

We are One in Hope

Pat thinks the virtue of hope undergirds the online community. She acknowledges that she would love to meet everyone face-to-face but the virtue of hope helps to overcome this loss. She describes the bonds of this community that instill hope: a love of theology, a commitment to the Church, a shared suffering of indifference from within and outside the Church, and persecution even by family members and friends who call us *wing-nuts* because of our zeal. The Catholic Church is about community, she reminds us. The more face-to-face rejection we experience, the more we need a supportive community whose strength is hidden in the network of cyberspace.

She describes the Internet as a tool of unity—a gift from God. It enables the online research community and the CDU community to connect and establish a bond of unity. She sees many similarities between the online community at CDU and the early Church communities of the Apostles after the death of Christ. For example, at CDU we are exploring a new territory—a thoroughly new medium for education and *catechesis*. Like the first Christians who were adult converts, CDU students are older, yet most speak of discovering their faith in a new way. There is a youthful exuberance, an optimism and joy in the online community. She notes that the Apostles met in the homes of the early Christians where they openly talked about their love of Christ. They are supported in their struggles by the other members of the Christian community. Likewise, she sees a similar support and openness in sharing the faith in the CDU online community. It is a haven and source of encouragement and prayer.

As an adult learner, Pat also appreciates reading the struggles of her classmates in trying to balance academics with family responsibilities: “Just knowing my little CDU community is out there makes a very real, positive difference.” Pat admits that in

our embodied state, we can only be in one place at one time. We receive the sacraments of the Church, even though we cannot receive them with each other. However, to be a community we are called to commune; we do commune in online conversations and prayers. "So who needs the human body when it comes to the most important thing!"

Gabriel Marcel (1937/1951/1967) writes about hope in the context of community: "I hope for you. It is not enough to say that you remain present to me. I do not separate you from myself, and what is not for you cannot be for me either. *Agape* lies at the root of hope" (p. 183).

Similarities and Differences

Debbie notes differences rather than similarities between the CDU community and the early Christians. Our communication medium covers a lot more geographical and cultural distance than the first century Christian Community. The online community seems to communicate more frequently and exchange much more information on a wide variety of topics. She adds that it is easy to be left behind in the online community if you don't keep up. It is a great advantage to have access to education and Church teaching online today: "The global impact of the online community is immense" she says. She worries about our dependence on it, and the control it may have on our lives. She points out not only the heightened potential for disseminating the truth, but the dangers in the weeds that have grown up because of the Internet, such as pornography. She adds that her parish uses the Internet to lead fallen-away Catholics back to the Church and to face-to-face gatherings at her parish.

Pat wonders if the presence of the body in face-to-face discussions actually inhibits serious discussion. She gives the example of women's groups at her parish that remain superficial:

The group pressure of being nice and agreeable at all costs is often a force which directs and controls the degree and intensity of the conversation. Face-to-face is

not necessarily the best thing for the emergence of truth. People refrain from saying certain things, and others say too much. Comments are taken personally and people go away offended.

Pat notes that CDU has no time for pettiness. This may be a reflection of CDU as an academic community with faculty supervision, grades, policies, and financial implications. Two motivators Pat mentions at CDU that do not necessarily exist at the parish are a serious desire to know God and a financial sacrifice in paying tuition. She wonders if communicating by written word and having a 150 word limit in class postings requires the CDU community to be serious, thoughtful, and succinct. Some members of the parish community who attend group meetings, according to Pat, show up primarily for the refreshments. CDU's virtual coffee in the online Café would not appeal to them. Pat wonders in text if the mind might be the physical dimension of who we are when we are online.

Davin focuses on the communal aspects of the CDU community that strengthen his sense of belonging. He likes the encouragement he receives from other students he emails, the camaraderie with those who are struggling in a challenging course. He is moved by the prayers that students offer for one another: "Many students post prayer requests for finals, comps, and papers. That is something that doesn't happen without community...The prayer support that I receive from CDU is priceless." The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) describes prayer as communion:

...prayer is the living relationship of the children of God with their Father who is good beyond measure, with his Son Jesus Christ and with the Holy Spirit...Prayer is *Christian* insofar as it is communion with Christ and extends throughout the Church, which is his Body. Its dimensions are those of Christ's love. (p. 615)

Lori thinks the CDU community shares a focus on faith similar to the early Christian communities in Rome. "We are very centered and focused, and faith is at the top of our value list." She also sees a parallel in the diversity of the global online

network reminiscent of the vast spread of early Christianity. Reflecting on an earlier request to the research community for prayers for a little boy who was dying from cancer, Lori responds: “I feel a *tangible* network of the Body of Christ interceding and lifting this family up to the Lord in prayer. This proves that the potential for community online is real and valuable.”

Davin believes that the community is CDU’s greatest resource. He talks about his faith journey as a child from the Church of Christ, a very insular community, to the Catholic Church in 2001, a universal community, and how his sense of community as part of the online community continues to grow:

As I become more acquainted with the CDU community, I can see us helping each other. I have used others’ ideas and have offered my own. Who knows—I might be in Germany some day and need to give Pat a call or in Australia and give Stephen or Katrina a call, or in New York and give Kathy a call or in Kansas and stop by and see Leo. When I ask for prayer, the worldwide community of CDU responds.

Gayle mentions the Catholic understanding of community as incorporating the living and the dead, heaven and earth, a communion “in holy things” and “among holy persons.” The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994) explains that “Since all the faithful form one body the good of each is communicated to the others” (p. 247). This communion extends from the living to the dead, since only the body dies but, according to Catholic belief, the soul lives forever.

Although a few members of the research community prefer a face-to-face community, they uniformly express gratitude for the online community because it enables them to pursue their educational goals in theology despite geography, family responsibilities, and health issues. There is consensus that their community is real and supports and sustains their educational activities; in addition, it provides friendship, emotional support, spiritual growth, humor, wisdom, and knowledge— in a word, human presence.

In Chapter Five, the research community examines more closely the implications of seeking and contemplating the face of Christ, seeking divine presence in the net of human presence. Acknowledging spiritual growth through their academic life online, the research community now looks more closely at the dynamic of faith development in the online community. This is a phenomenon described by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger (1996), now Pope Benedict XVI, as a gift initiated from outside that unites them in their receptivity:

Faith is not something we excogitate ourselves; man does not make himself a Christian...He always becomes a Christian from outside: by means of a gift that can only come to him from another, through the 'thou' of Christ, in whom the 'thou' of God encounters him...A community that is its own author is no longer an image of the dialogical mystery of revelation and of the gift of grace that always comes from without and can be attained only in receiving... (p. 289)

Faith, then, is a testimony to a relationship that is initiated by God and received as a gift within the context of a community, the community of the Church.

We who are researchers of presence in distance ask with John Paul II (2002) about this new forum of the Internet as the path of our spiritual journey: "From this galaxy of sight and sound will the face of Christ emerge and the voice of Christ be heard" (par. 6)? Heidegger (1953/1993c) reminds us in his reflections on technology, "For questioning is the piety of thought" (p. 341). Our questioning and seeking for the face of Christ leads us forward to continue our reflections of lived experience in a technologically-mediated world.

CHAPTER FIVE:
PRESENCE IN DISTANCE: THE COMMUNITY
CONTEMPLATES THE FACE OF CHRIST

Seek the face of Christ in everything, everyone, everywhere,
all the time, and see his hand in every happening—that is
contemplation in the heart of the world.
(Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta, 1997, p. 31)

You have said, “Seek my face.”
My heart says to you,
“Your face, Lord, do I seek.”
Hide not your face from me.
(Psalm 27, *The New Testament and the Psalms*, 2006, p. 542)

Shortly after John Paul II was elected Pope in 1978 he began preparations for the great Jubilee of the new millennium. He proclaimed the gift of the Jubilee as a call to “Seek the face of Christ” and through a growing intimacy with Christ, to “Put out into the Deep,” (2001, *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 7), to cast our nets far and wide, to cross the threshold of the Internet, to make the face of Christ present in a world defined more and more by communications technology.

John Paul II (2001) explains why we seek and contemplate a face: “...we shall not be saved by a formula but by a Person, and the assurance which he gives us: *I am with you!*” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 39). To contemplate the Face who is present with us, John Paul II calls Christians to prayer, to holiness, to an ongoing participation in the Sacraments of the Church, to catechesis as a *listening* to the word of God, to proclamation as “servants of the Word” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 51), and to love by living a spirituality of communion. He describes the spirituality of communion as living in the community of the Church, and more broadly the community of the world:

A spirituality of communion implies also the ability to see what is positive in others, to welcome it and prize it as a gift from God: not only as a gift for the brother or sister who has received it directly, but also as a 'gift for me.' A spirituality of communion means, finally, to know how to make room for our brothers and sisters, bearing each other's burdens, and resisting the selfish temptations which constantly beset us and provoke competition, careerism, distrust, and jealousy (p. 57)

Chapter Five connects the Church's call to the lived experience of the online research community who, as theology students, seek the face of Christ online as presence in distance. They reflect on how they live the spirituality of communion through a computer network that calls them to embodiment limited to the dance of fingers on keyboards, a life of presence and absence in the mystery of text made present through technology. They share the similarities between their life on the Net and the traditional path of the spiritual journey. The ultimate purpose of their presence online, the contemplation of the face of Christ, is reflected in these conversations. They acknowledge how what they share with one another transforms their search, defines their identity, and deepens their contemplation of the Face. Pope Benedict XVI (2007b) writes, "The Lord always remains our contemporary...The Lord does not speak in the past but speaks in the present, he speaks to us today..." (p. 19). These conversations reveal the call to understand better how Christ is present today in the computer-mediated education of presence in distance.

The Dance of Presence in Absence

You have turned my mourning into dancing.
(Psalm 30, *The New Testament and the Psalms*, 2006, p. 544)

In the journey to God, there is struggle. In the online journey for the adult learner the search for presence and recognition demands that we persist through text to read each other's smiles in abstract symbols on computer screens, since the faces we long for

are hidden in text. Davin describes the particular anxiety of a new semester, a new course, a new professor, and a new area of theology to the online adult learner. Books are assigned, deadlines are posted, and online discussion exposes us to the possibility of ridicule, misunderstanding, or no reaction at all. The face of Christ is hard to find in the anxiety of online learners at the beginning of a new semester. As time passes, we adjust to the dance of text in the movement of our fingers; the faces of classmates begin to illuminate, as we become more visible to them and to ourselves. We begin to feel comfortable in the corporeality of dancing fingers and reading text. We are drawn into the learning community and discover the glance of Christ in the text of teachers and classmates, as distance becomes presence. Dr. Cathy, however, still insists: "I am inadequate for the task."

The Call

The online learning community is formed from a call. John Paul II (1996) describes the call as a vocation to mystery: "A vocation is a mystery of divine election" (p. 3). *Vocation* is French, a noun whose verb means to call or summon. It refers to the "action on the part of God of calling a person to exercise some special function, especially of a spiritual nature or to fill a certain position...divine guidance toward a definite career; directed toward a special work in life; a natural tendency or fitness for such work" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 3649) The root word, *vocare*, is found in words such as *vocal*, that refer to the voice that speaks, and *vocabulary*, that refers to words that define. Dr. Cathy describes how she came to CDU: "I felt called to CDU from the moment I stumbled upon it on the Net. CDU entails an element of discipleship, with a carrying of the cross..." Davin describes how he found CDU: "I, too, stumbled upon CDU and felt called...I too was afraid...it seems almost like the Apostles, when Jesus called them."

The Call to Be

The call, as a vocation, suggests that a voice is heard, a call is spoken, a person is addressed, and a relationship is formed or deepened in the response to the call. Dr. Cathy and Davin acknowledge they have been addressed, have heard their names called in the silence of the Net. Cardinal Ratzinger (1996), now Pope Benedict XVI, describes the gift of faith as a “dialogic mystery” (p. 289). John Paul II (1996) quotes the words of Christ in St. John’s Gospel: “You did not choose me, but I chose you...” (JN 15:16, p. 3). Each member of the research community has a story to tell of the mysterious call to CDU, and the anxiety encountered in the acceptance of the call.

Anxiety is the state of being anxious (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 95). *Anxious* is Latin from the verb *angere*, meaning to choke or distress. It has the same root word, *ang*, as in *anger*, which means troubled or afflicted (Oxford English Dictionary, p. 82). Anxiety is the state of being troubled, of feeling threatened, uneasy in mind about some uncertain event in the future, being in painful or disturbing suspense. It can also mean the opposite—full of desire and endeavor. The divine call usually embodies both senses of anxiety, beginning with the state of being troubled, and eventually becoming full of desire, a dance, when the call is accepted, that moves one from absence to presence.

O’Donohue (1999) describes anxiety as a presence in lived space or time. We become anxious by something that approaches us that we do not recognize, or we begin to worry about an event that has not yet occurred. The imagination fills us with fantasies that usually are exaggerated and far worse than reality. He describes people who dwell in permanent worry and those who make a habit of anxiety. John Paul II (2001) proposes that anxiety is overcome through contemplation:

Ours is a time of continual movement which often leads to restlessness, with the risk of ‘doing for the sake of doing.’ We must resist this temptation by trying ‘to be’ before trying ‘to do.’ (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 24)

In many ways, the online community at CDU discovers that the call to become a student of theology online is a more contemplative call as the body lives out the call in the familiarity and safety of home. Conversation and community take place in the silence of text, and the asynchronous schedule contributes to reflection and contemplation.

The Cross

Most CDU students have academic backgrounds in fields unrelated to theology. The discipleship of the call that Dr. Cathy describes as “carrying of the cross” involves a demanding academic program, new vocabulary and patterns of thought, tuition payments, a major time commitment, and no apparent “pay-off” in the form of a new job or promotion; for some, because the program is all distance with no residency, the local diocese does not recognize its validity. It is typical for CDU students to wonder why they are present and what they will do with an MA in Theology when they finish the program.

Pat asks the question: “Have you met anyone at CDU who has a clear conception of what to do with this great knowledge? What happens when we begin to tell about our love for Christ and our willingness to study so hard to know him better? Do we really know why we embark on this dreadfully foolish and expensive venture, often defying family and friends?” Gayle responds: “So at age 52, I will have a Bachelor’s Degree in Theology that by social standards is a waste.” Her Presbyterian parents actually worry that she just might do something with her degree! Pat describes the apparent lack of practical purpose as an absence that for the online community is a presence:

The absence of an answer does seem to be a particular sort of presence! I can’t imagine the Apostles having an answer either. The absence is something that bonds us and separates us from other university students. It feels great!

Gayle adds, “All of us *wing-nuts* at least enjoy a camaraderie in our lunacy.” Davin calls it “A great Adventure!” Dr. Cathy quotes King David in the Old Testament: “I will go on dancing to honor the Lord, and will disgrace myself even more” (2 Sm 6:21-22, as posted).

In what way does God allow us to dwell in questions experienced as absence to make his face more present to the online community who studies theology? Rumi (2004), a thirteenth century Sufi poet, offers emptiness as presence in the relationship with God:

Your deepest desire for a window
Should be as an open empty place
Through which to hear the call to prayer. (p. 329)

Gadamer (1960/1999) describes the question as opening us to possibilities, to presence rather than absence: “The essence of the question is to open up possibilities and keep them open” (p. 299). He uses the example of Socrates: “...the example of Socrates teaches that the important thing is the knowledge that one does not know” (p. 365). The theological journey that leads to no apparent goal, keeps the online community open to the call.

The cross of absence is a sign of the supernatural origin of the call, and why it calls forth anxiety in the world of practical realities. The cross is the presence of the call and the absence of knowing where it leads, a dynamic typical of the spiritual journey in general.

In spite of the cross of presence in absence, the greater online community at CDU is rich and unpredictable: airline pilots, medical doctors, hospital chaplains, college professors, nurses, environmental scientists, teachers, a juggler, a professional soccer player, a forensic scientist, active duty military personnel, a retired federal judge, a farmer, a rancher, young mothers, journalists—all hear a call in the silence of the Net

and say yes. Pope Benedict describes the call of the first Apostles as a response to the gaze of Christ—Christ does not give answers but requires trust. The research community volunteers to dwell in the text of their encounter with the face of Christ because they are searching for meaning in the experience of presence in distance, in the dance of fingers on keyboards in pursuit of the Face.

The Mind of Theology

Davin describes the journey of his dance as absence at the beginning of a new course in moral theology: “I felt like I was groping in darkness. I was searching, grasping, reading, writing, and trying to understand...” The teaching presence of a professor through encouraging words on his first essay gives Davin a surge of hope. He begins to grasp structural approaches to morality based on the difference between obligation and happiness; his own ideas and behaviors correspond to what he learns. His identity is more conformed to Christ. He describes the transformation of having “the tools and words to adequately express myself.” Pat, too, finds the “words and proper ways of saying things” she had always felt. Davin moves from anxiety as trouble to anxiety as eagerness, from absence to presence: “It is good to feel that you are not alone and there are others who believe and think the way you do.” Davin’s fingers move from the anxiety of feeling alone to the comfort of belonging to a community. “I felt more confident, secure, blessed, and complete when I finished this course.” The educational journey for the online learner is the dance from absence to presence; the dance is typical with the completion of each course.

How is the face of Christ made visible in the study of theology? Davin has just signed up for a new course on the Sacraments: “I am confident that Christ will become more present to me as I go through the course.” Knowledge adds presence, it seems. I wonder if the hunger for more knowledge of the mystery of God is the absence that drives the hunger for presence at CDU. Palmer (1993) describes the relationship of the

knower to the known as nuptial: "To know in truth is to become betrothed, to engage the known with one's whole self, is an engagement one enters with attentiveness, care, and good will" (p. 31). The relationship of growing in the knowledge of God through God's word is an experience of growing in divine and human love. God is fully present, and our sharing in his knowledge is a participation in the fullness of his presence. This is why the journey of presence in distance transforms. Dr. Pia de Solenni (2002), a Catholic theologian and writer, describes the intimate relationship between knowing and loving:

In Hebrew, the words for mind and heart are the same. So the concept of knowing and loving are intricately united in an intellectual understanding. Similarly, with regards to Mary the mother of God who kept things 'in her heart,' heart and mind were often signified with the same word in ancient Hebrew. (p. 10)

This is the dance of presence in absence, of anxiety to knowledge, as theology is a journey that leads from knowledge to love.

Theology has been defined as faith seeking understanding. It calls for systematically applying rational thought to a deeper understanding of God's revelation, and our response of faith. Catholic philosopher, Joseph Pieper (1986/1992), explains that "...in the Christian concept of belief," quoting Martin Luther, "Belief is always addressed to a person" (p. 29). John Paul II (1979) describes the "irreplaceable mission of theology in the service of faith" (p. 50) and the dangers of faulty theologizing: "Thus it is no surprise that every stirring in the field of theology has repercussions in *catechesis*" (p. 50). The CDU online community is engaged in the academic study of theology that has an irrepensible influence on their faith in God. St. John, in his Gospel, defines eternal life as knowledge of God: "And this is eternal life, that they know you the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom you have sent" (*New Testament and the Psalms*, JN 17:3). The online research community describes how the anxiety of studying theology is a journey of knowledge that leads to love.

The Manifold of Possibilities

Gayle believes every aspect of her journey as an online theology student reveals the face of Christ to her. She finds “the broad spectrum of classmates” that is typical of a global community an opportunity to discover commonalities and contrasts with her own life. John Paul II (2001) describes the spirit of communion within the Church as “an ability to think of our brothers and sisters in faith within the profound unity of the Mystical Body and therefore as those who are part of me” (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 57). Palmer (1993) describes knowledge of God for a Christian as “...a knowledge that does not distance us from the world but brings us into community, face to face.” Palmer describes the deepest source of this knowledge as love: “St. Paul urges us to reach for the deepest source of knowledge—love—allowing it to transform our way of knowing and being” (p. 16). Gayle discovers the love of God in the variety of classmates and their own personal stories shared online in the dance of their fingers making them present in distance.

The content of each course is relevant personally to each learner, Gayle believes, because of the opportunity for reflection inherent in the structure of an asynchronous online course. She uses the metaphor of a circle to describe the richness of online discussion that she compares to a circle of observers viewing a sculpture in a museum: “...the person right next to me may notice something that I had failed to notice, while the person clear on the other side of the circle will see and describe something that was totally out of my field of vision but which helps me further understand the artist’s work.”

Gayle’s metaphor of the circle describes the revelation of meaning that the online learning community opens for her as a gaze on the face of Christ. Palmer (1993) describes the two poles of solitude and community as a paradox in the spiritual life:

Solitude opens us to the heart of love which makes community possible; life in community manifests the love we touch in solitude. Community requires solitude to renew its bonds; solitude requires community to express and test these bonds. (p. 122)

Sokolowski (1994) explains the formal process of a phenomenological description that describes what Husserl meant by a manifold of appearances:

We have to move spatially, bring into focus, articulate thoughtfully, remember, imagine, anticipate, sympathize, intend emptily in many diverse ways, return and recognize the same thing again, and so on, and the activities we have to carry out are prescribed by the nature of the thing we are trying to identify. Both the objective presences and absences and the subjective intuitions and empty intendings, both the *noematic* and the *noetic* factors, as Husserl calls them, have essential and necessary structures, and these patterns are to be brought to light in a phenomenological analysis. (p. 25)

Sokolowski (1974) describes in more detail the hierarchy of manifolds, which forms an identity within a manifold of impressions and shadings:

Variations in the impressions/shadings occur because of changes in time, changes in the disposition of the medium through which we perceive, and changes in our own psychic state. In contrast to apparitions, sides, and aspects, which are all objective, the impressions/shadings are subjective and depend on factors not attributable to the thing itself, but to the medium or to the sensibility of the perceiver. (p. 92)

He points out that when we move into impressions, we move into a new dimension that involves the lived body. He explains that as “episodes in my lived body they enjoy a lived spatiality...the thing will appear differently in response to changes in my spatial condition” (pp. 89-90). Sokolowski’s explanation of Husserl’s understanding of the manifold of appearances calls into question the lived experience for Gayle and other online learners who learn in the comfort of home. Gayle’s enjoyment is shared with the ease of dwelling at home. Gayle notes other advantages of online learning: the opportunity of reflection in asynchronous time, the richness of text, the silence and

peace of working alone in the comfort of home, and at the same time feeling connected to a community that she feels is present and connected to her.

For Gayle, the final and most important dimension of the spiritual journey is the change from within, to become the face of Christ for others, to experience knowledge as love. She likes Huebner's (1999) description of this pedagogical process: "the integration of knowledge into love as the continual creation or recreation of the universe" (p. 350). Palmer (1993) believes that personal truth leads us toward others, toward "a community of relationship, dialogue, and mutual transformation" (p. 57). His vision of human life as communal is reminiscent of the work of Gabriel Marcel. Palmer understands community as also incorporating the natural world and the world of God:

If we are to grow as persons and expand our knowledge of the world, we must consciously participate in the emerging community of our lives, in the claims made upon us by others as well as our claims upon them. Only in community does the person appear in the first place, and only in community can the person continue to become. (p. 57)

Marcel (1937/1951/1967) describes our relationship to the world as nuptial: "Now the bond that unites us to the world in which we have to live is in some sense nuptial" (p. 181). As an adult learner, Gayle prefers the quiet contemplation of life online and the community that contemplates the face of Christ through reading and writing text. Her penchant for privacy does not inhibit her active participation in the conversations of the research community. As a former Protestant, she is a scholar of sacred text and frequently enriches the text of our conversations with appropriate quotations and interpretations from Sacred Scripture.

We are Pioneers

Lori calls us pioneers. Do we dwell in the ground of online learning as a faith community? Are we groundbreakers? *Pioneer* comes from Old French, *peon*, and originally meant a foot soldier who marched in advance of the army with tools to dig

the ground and clear the way. It also refers to “anyone who goes before or opens the way for others to follow; one who begins or takes part in beginning an enterprise; an original investigator, explorer or worker, a forerunner” (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 2182). Lori explains what she means: “We see the importance and efficacy of what we are doing. Many don’t value it and belittle it. The Apostles faced similar ridicule. I like to think we are *pioneers*, forging new paths into expansive and wonderful territories!” What do we reveal about the face of Christ in the online community by digging and clearing the way for others to follow? Heidegger (1953/1993c) reminds us that “...the essential unfolding of technology gives man entry into something which, of himself, he can neither invent nor in any way make” (p. 337). What is the meaning of being a pioneer of presence in distance? What is the dirt of our dwelling in cyberspace, I wonder? Heidegger (1927/1993a) describes the answer to the question of the meaning of Being “not a matter of grounding in deduction but rather of laying bare and exhibiting the ground” (p. 49). What does our online presence reveal through the dance of our fingers that calls forth ridicule? Is being present in distance dwelling in dirt? Does it reflect the face of Christ?

Maya Angelou (1993) writes about the ridicule of prejudice and the power she finds in the word of God:

I knew that if God loved me, I could do wonderful things.

I could try great things, learn anything, achieve anything. For what could stand against me with God, since one person, any person with God, constitutes the majority? That knowledge humbles me, melts my bones, closes my ears, and makes my teeth rock loosely in their gums...I am a big bird winging over high mountains, down into serene valleys. I am ripples of waves on silver seas. I’m a spring leaf trembling in anticipation. (p. 65)

Ridicule (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 2543) is French and originates in the verb *to laugh*. Angelou quotes her grandmother, *Mamma*, who frequently repeated her own way of expressing faith in the word of God: “I will step out on the word of God” (p. 64). The

presence of the word of God in text, and our words typed in response to the word of God, inspire the theological community to contemplate the face of Christ through words projected on networked computers. The community shares the work of digging and clearing, of helping one another see Christ present in text and, as John Paul II insists, to become the face of Christ for others in the many communities to which our faces are present.

The Gaze of the Face

The online learning community travels an invisible net in the comfort of home in search of a face that reaches beyond understanding through the text of divine love. They spend their asynchronous time and text trying to describe the transformation that each one experiences through the commitment to contemplate the face of Christ in an online study of theology. They struggle in language to describe how the power of language makes them present to one another and makes Christ present to them in the strange world of networked computers. Heidegger (1947/1993b) describes the power in language as the revealing of being: "Language is the house of Being. In its home man dwells. Those who think and those who create with words are the guardians of this home" (p. 217). The research community dwells in a virtual campus and participates in virtual conversations about a real encounter with God.

Faith is Presence

Pat returns from a weekend in Rome where she attended Mass at St. Peter's Basilica and prayed for the members of the research community:

The Mass was in Latin and Italian, there were nineteen cardinals, nine bishops, twenty priests and over twenty altar servers. We got seats in the third row. Too cool for words and too normal at the same time. It was where we are at home and at the same time, like a dream. But some things are always the same like the

little altar boy sleeping during Mass leaning up against the high altar of St. Peter!
The whole experience moved me to tears.

This is Pat's first visit to St. Peter's Basilica in twenty-five years of living in Germany. We are excited with an enthusiasm that anxiously awaits to share her encounter through the sharing of text. Her text makes us present in the home of our faith. In his book, *The Spirit of the Liturgy*, Cardinal Ratzinger (2000), now Pope Benedict XVI, explains the theological significance of worship:

Worship gives us a share in heaven's mode of existence, in the world of God, and allows light to fall from that divine world into ours. In this sense, worship...has the character of anticipation. It lays hold in advance of a more perfect life and, in so doing, gives our present life its proper measure. (p. 21)

Pat describes her experience at the Sunday Mass at St. Peter's: "It was as if I were in a great cloud taken up with all the saints and all those at my side...We were in fact quite unable to say anything sensible in words but we could read each other's hearts and knew." For Pat the experience of worship at St. Peter's becomes a metaphor for the online experience of contemplating the face of Christ, as presence in distance. She compares the tourists milling around inattentively during the Mass to her own mystical experience only a few yards away. She asks, "How is it that when we are within twenty yards of each other we can have such radically different reactions to the same event?" To her, God is unmistakably present. To the tourists, it is merely a weekly religious ritual.

Pat describes the difference as the presence of faith. Being face-to-face with the Mass did not make the face of Christ present to the tourists at St. Peter's. John Paul II (2001) makes a similar point when he notes that no matter how much Christ's body was seen or touched, "...only faith could fully enter the mystery of that face...One can never really reach Jesus except by the path of faith..." (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 28). Pat describes it as living at the level where God dwells. The online community is not

physically present to one another, but we dwell together in faith where God is present: “This is the level of sharing beliefs, insights, prayers, and experiences online. This level is divine presence.” What draws us to study theology at CDU, she thinks, is an absence that makes God present: “Without being empty we cannot be filled now, can we?” she asks.

Dr. Cathy is reminded of her Jewish neighbors, Esther and Muri, who also return from a recent visit to the Vatican:

They were the tourists at St. Peter’s Basilica that Pat described, totally lacking in any sense of wonder and awe. For me, just to consider being at St. Peter’s makes me swoon.

She notes the caption for their Vatican photos: “Jesus was a Jew.” They do not have the faith that recognizes Jesus as Messiah. Dr. Cathy agrees with Pat that faith is what makes the face of Christ present in the online community: “Faith is crucial...we share a bond of love for Christ. Without faith in Christ, this experience would be shallow and meaningless.” Nancy adds, “Faith is essential to presence. Faith is the glue that binds us.” How does the recognition of divine presence enhance our online presence? How does online presence lead us to the contemplation of the face of Christ?

The Face is Present

Gayle uses the metaphor of impending Lasik surgery to explain how we are present in our apparent absence: “...though my vision at the moment is blurred, I am relying on other means to relate to my husband who is no less present to me because I cannot see him clearly...please be assured of my presence with you all in my textual absence☺.” By now, even without Gayle’s text on our screens, we know she is present in our online community. We pray for her and make her present through our prayers.

Davin tells us that he sees the face of Christ in the virtual world of CDU: “As I peruse the virtual halls of the CDU campus, the face of Christ is everywhere. In the

humor, the anguish, hope, and compassion, the excitement and camaraderie...the online campus, the registrar's office, the business office...even though I am sitting in Gruver, Texas, I read text that describes my friend's visit to St. Peter's Basilica and visibly see the little altar boy fall asleep during Mass...the face of Christ is present to me in all those details...I feel his presence in Gruver, Texas." What does Davin see when he recognizes the face of Christ in the online world of CDU, I wonder? How does Christ reveal his face through our text? In what ways does the online world reveal a spirituality of communion as described by John Paul II? How does our text become a feast?

Dr. Cathy reminds us of the sacramental dimension of text. Perhaps this is how Davin sees the face of Christ in our text. St. Thomas Aquinas teaches that as embodied spirits we reach the supernatural world through the senses. Ryan (2004) argues that we become icons of God's presence to one another: "By both nature and grace we are sacraments for one another, visible signs and tangible expressions of the mystery that grounds and permeates all of life" (p. 6). Are visible signs and tangible expressions of the human face now embodied in our text? Dr. Cathy adds, "We must embrace the mystery and search for him in the absence of silence in prayer, spending our solitude "listening." John Paul II (2001) also calls us to dwell in presence and mystery in our search to contemplate the face of Christ:

...We cannot come to the fullness of contemplation of the Lord's face by our own efforts alone, but by allowing grace to take us by the hand. Only the experience of silence and prayer offers the proper setting for the growth and development of a true, faithful, and consistent knowledge of that mystery... (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 29)

Dr. Cathy tells us: "To the person of deep faith, who is properly disposed, the absence becomes his presence." Blessed Mother Teresa of Calcutta (1997) explains that in prayer, "The essential thing is not what we say, but what God says to us and through

us. In that silence, he will listen to us; there he will speak to our soul, and there we will hear his voice” (p. 20).

Nobel Prize writer, the late Czeslaw Milosz, explains the difficulty in seeing God beyond the sensible signs of every day existence. This is similar to the experience of absence that members of the online learning community describe when they begin a new course. Milosz describes the tension and humility needed to live the dynamic of presence in absence—to see God in the face of another, and for those who dwell in the online community, to see God in the text of others:

Veni Creator

I am only a man: I need visible signs.
I tire easily, building the stairway of abstraction.
Many a time I asked, you know it well,
That the statue in church
Lift its hand, only once, just once, for me.
But I understand that signs must be human,
Therefore call one man, anywhere on earth,
Not me—after all I have some decency—
And allow me when I look at him, to marvel at you. (2008,
http://www.poetseers.org/nobel_prize_for_literature/czeslaw_milosz/czelaw_milosz_poems)

Conversations reveal the gaze of Christ visible in the online community through their faith, through the silence of text, in the life of a community that cares and encourages. As a catechist of presence in distance, I ask, what their text reveals that faces may hide. How do asynchronous time and the comfort of home contribute to the depth of presence that the body may hide? What is the depth of presence in the permanence of text?

Wounded Presence

In the gaze of the face of Christ we find suffering that is mirrored in the human face. This, too, is part of the spiritual journey. O'Donohue (1999) describes the tension in our longing to belong: "Our hunger to belong is the longing to find a bridge across the distance from isolation to intimacy" (p. xxii). In order to stretch and grow, we need the anchor of belonging: "...each of us needs the anchor of belonging in order to bend with the storms and reach towards the light" (p. xxiii). Dr. Cathy shares the wound of her mother's death in 1993 that left her tormented and overwhelmed by grief. Her loss caused her to draw closer to God to overcome the loss of her mother's presence. "Enrollment at CDU has been my remedy. I contemplate the face of Christ through the courses and the online community...In many ways, I feel like Jesus has thrown me a life-preserver in the form of CDU." Loss is part of each story shared in the online research community. God reaches us through our pain. Theologian, Jacques Philippe (2005) writes about the link between prayer and pain: "In the final analysis, experience shows that to pray well...it is necessary for the heart to be wounded by a thirst for the Beloved":

We can descend into the prayer of the heart and dwell there only through this wound of love. God must touch us at the deepest level of our being so that we can no longer proceed without him. (p. 82)

Distance reveals presence, according to Marcel (1937/1951/1967). He suggests that distance is actually "something very near." He explains how absence reveals presence: "Can we not say that there is no presence except in absence or through absence, and that it is precisely in this that transcendence consists in?" (p. 175). He uses the example of how familiarity blinds us: "I cease to see those with whom I live in as much as this life in common consists in a routine of actions and reactions due to living together. In this respect, my near and dear ones are not present to me" (p. 176). He

concludes, "In order that I see the other it will be necessary that something puts him at a distance from me" (p. 176). In what way is being present only in text, a way of making distance presence, as I attend to another through the limitations of digitized text?

In Dr. Cathy's loss, her absence deepens her presence of the face of Christ. Her mother's presence at home is exchanged for the presence of an online community that leads Dr. Cathy to the transcendent presence of God. Debbie reminds her that our online communication makes us more present to each other. "We form relationships," she says. "Relationship is what makes us persons, is it not? We are made for relationship with God and with one another."

Humble Presence

Living the virtue of humility embodies the dynamic of presence in absence and is an essential virtue for anyone who strives to be present to God. Palmer (1993) describes humility as "the virtue that allows us to pay attention to the other" (p. 108). He explains the relationship between humility and community:

Humility not only creates a space in which the other can speak; it also allows us to enter into obedience to the other. The spiritual life is lived in a balance of paradoxes, and the humility that enables us to hear the truth of others must stand in creative tension with the faith that empowers us to speak our own. (p. 109)

Gayle thinks the virtue of humility is a human absence that makes room for the presence of God. Dwelling in the absence of physical presence for the online learning community is an experience of sensual reduction, a humility that requires us to seek presence in text, which requires more effort and time. Does our submission to this kind of presence in absence reward us with a deeper presence in the humility of text?

Humility (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 1346) comes from the French, whose root word is *humus*, meaning ground or earth. Humility is the opposite of pride and is marked by the absence of self-assertion. In the online community, text is more subtle;

words may hide or project self-assertion in the limitations of written text or the bias of the reader.

Humility is a synonym for lowly, and the only proper and reasonable path in search of the face of God. Distance education still retains a humble stature in many traditional institutions and accrediting bodies. It promotes an atmosphere of humility through the limitation of textual communication, the equality of participation in the learning community, in the identity of faculty, and the phenomenon of disembodied presence. Humility is more apt to dwell in the text of reflection and edited thought.

Deacon Jim reflects on the significance of online posting. He has been lurking all week because of a hectic schedule: “I have been absent to you, but you have been present to me in your text.” Deacon Jim, who has the strongest theological background as ordained clergy, links the attributes of online posting to the text of Sacred Scripture:

What I mean is that I conjure images of the people who have posted, interpolate their meanings, read them in context. The posts also stay with me throughout my day—even more than classroom conversations do. Perhaps because the classroom conversation is over when the class ends. The conversations online have an effect on my deliberations, decisions, and my homilies.

Lori types: “These conversations stay with us in a different way. I too find myself leaving the computer to meditate on something I’ve read. Often my faith is deepened. “

Simple Presence

Pat reflects on the German language and how it expresses the difference between the presence of God and human presence. She writes that two German words come to mind that describe the dynamic of presence in absence, *einfach* and *vielfach*. Through God’s presence, *einfach*, we experience absence that reveals a deeper human presence. *Einfach* means simple and refers to the singularity of God’s being as compared to *vielfach* that describes our multi-layered being as embodied spirits. *Einfachheit* is the transformation that we undergo in becoming more singular and simple, as we grow in

the likeness of God. Gayle believes the virtue of humility is a human absence that makes room for the presence of God. Pat explains, "We are layered with all sorts of complexes whereas God is pure love." She links our layers to the myriad of material belongings that tie us down. Online, she notes, we are stripped of much of our sensual stimulation. We have fewer distractions in the presence of our computer-mediated text: "Maybe this is why we speak of an absence because we become less encumbered and learn to accept ourselves as God accepts us."

Pat offers a metaphor of the Scottish kilt that when turned, unfolds with full color and beauty: "The more we move into the simplicity of God's love, the more beauty we add to our unique individuality. It is the blending of all the colors that makes the whole singular and beautiful." O'Donohue (2004) describes color as "the language of light...In a world without color, it would be impossible to imagine beauty; for color and beauty are sisters" (pp. 82-83). John Paul II (2001) describes the task of the new millennium as a showing of the light of Christ: "A new millennium is opening in the light of Christ. But not everyone can see this light. Ours is the wonderful and demanding task of becoming its reflection" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 70). Is the light of Christ reflected in our online presence?

Nancy believes that the absence of material distractions makes the online conversation more like the spiritual exchange we enjoy with God in prayer. "This absence online helps reveal who we are," she thinks. O'Donohue (1999) describes the hidden presence in absence: "It seems that absence is impossible without presence. Absence is a sister of presence" (p. 223).

Text is Presence

The online community reflects on the meaning of contemplating the face of Christ in their online world of text. *Contemplate* (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 534) is from Latin and is derived from the root word, *temple*. To contemplate means to

inhabit a temple and gaze upon. This understanding reflects the theological understanding of the soul as the dwelling place of God; to contemplate is to inhabit the temple of the soul where God dwells in the fullness of presence.

Leo likes to think of online communication as heart-to-heart communication, rather than the absence of the face-to-face. It reminds him of the prayer of adoration in a Catholic Church where Christ is sacramentally present and changes Leo's heart. He reminds us, "That encounter with Christ is a sacramental encounter, not a face-to-face encounter. What is important is the change of heart, rather than the medium of communication." Leo's description is the language of transformation where the human heart is changed, through our dwelling with God in the soul. The spiritual life is a transformation to Christ. The gaze of love transforms the face. O'Donohue (1999) describes the relationship between the mind and the soul: "The secret immensity of the soul is the longing for the divine...the divine calls us home to presence. Our longing is an echo of the divine longing for us" (p. 96). As Leo points out, our conversations in the contemplation of the face of Christ do not depend on embodied presence.

Nancy recalls the movie, *The Passion of the Christ*. Despite the vivid, sensual scenes of suffering, she is drawn to the captioned subtitles of Christ's words from Sacred Scripture: "I remember wishing that someone would just pause the action, and silence the sound, so I could reflect on the powerful Scriptural verses of Christ's words. I realized the word of God impacted me more than the scenes depicted by the actors. My faith is truer to me than the depiction. I was moved more by the silent power of the text on the screen." The visual imagery in the movie may enhance the words of text for Nancy, but she confirms the power of text that makes the face of Christ present in the text of the online community: "He is revealing his face through this community and strengthening our faith in the process." Is the face of Christ more compelling in text, in silence, in prayer, in the call of community than in graphic visual imagery? Nancy responds, "We listen to the text with all our senses."

The human science researcher moves from parts to whole in the research process. As thematizing and interpreting a way to an understanding of the phenomenon comes to a close, as I have reflected on the particulars of each participant's search for meaning in the thematizing process, I am returned to the community as a powerful presence that confirms the miracle of text, projected on computer screens connected through the Internet but geographically separated by oceans. Pat describes the community we have formed as "a place where I am filled, not just spiritually but intellectually. I do not want to come down off the mountain," she tells us! "This is a place where I can be a learner and not always the teacher. I get filled here."

The ultimate expression of presence in distance for this community is to reach out in the desire for embodied presence: Pat tells us if any one of us could be in Wurzburg for a day, "I would drop everything to meet you—to crown our presence face-to-face with a hug." Our final conversation concludes with a promise to meet at Debbie's house in Dartmouth, Nova Scotia, for lobster! We marvel at the depths of what is revealed in the text of our community, yet, as Deacon Jim reminds us, we long for the face!

CHAPTER SIX:

PRESENCE IN DISTANCE: THE COMMUNITY BECOMES A FACE FOR OTHERS

And all of us, with our unveiled faces like mirrors reflecting the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the image that we reflect in brighter and brighter glory; this is the working of the Lord who is the Spirit.

(*The New Jerusalem Bible*, 1985, 2 CO 3:18, p. 1341)

Man is not the lord of beings. Man is the shepherd of Being. Man loses nothing in this “less”; rather, he gains in that he attains the truth of Being...Man is the neighbor of Being.

(Heidegger, 1947/1993b, p. 245)

What is presence in distance? As educator and catechist, as one who teaches the face of Christ through technology, the question that calls to me—*What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?*—is a question that calls forth a community in the shared gift of human presence through digitized text. Chapter Six is the text of a community that reflects on their pedagogical relationship to the question, to the Church, and to the world. We are catechists, educators, and adult learners. We are co-researchers, and I include as well the voices of those at the Vatican who volunteered to engage in conversations with me about computer-mediated communication and the presence of God’s word in the distance of technology. The meaning of our text encircles us in a web of pedagogical implications, a growing trust in the bonds of our technologically-mediated community, and a desire to proclaim our lived experience of presence through a community made present only in the net of the Internet and the web of text.

Catechesis of Presence and Community

Those who believe are never alone.
(Pope Benedict XVI, 2006b, par. 1)

A catechist is one who engages in *catechesis*. *Catechesis* is from the Greek and means instruction by word of mouth, oral transmission. The term's original meaning is to resound, to sound, to ring. It also refers to writings or treatises that pertain to "instruction in the elementary principles of Christianity" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 355) in the form of questions and answers. The online research community is catechetical because we are catechists in the Church, as parents, as volunteers, as paid professionals, who orally transmit the face of Christ in our face-to-face communities. I am the only member of this community whose professional work calls me to catechize presence in distance. Thus, I have posed my particular question to the community, to ponder what it means to be a catechist who dwells in digitized text, ringing out the encounter with Christ quietly through fingers dancing on a keyboard, rather than in voices proclaiming in speech or song. Our community ponders in the catechetical format of questions and answers, as text embodies conversations that search for the face of Christ through connections to the Internet that connect us to one another. Gadamer (1960/1999) reminds us of the meaning of conversation and the importance of our text:

Conversation is a process of coming to an understanding. Thus it belongs to every true conversation that each person opens himself to the other, truly accepts his point of view as valid and transposes himself into the other to such an extent that he understands not the particular individual but what he says. (p. 385)

The presence of the community is essential to our identity. Pope Benedict XVI (2007b) assures us that from the beginning Christ constituted the Church as a community:

And so, from the first moment of his salvific activity, Jesus of Nazareth strives to gather together the People of God. Even if his preaching is always an appeal for personal conversion, in reality he continually aims to build the People of God whom he came to bring together, purify, and save...in the perspective of biblical tradition and on the horizon of Judaism...it is clear that the entire mission [of Jesus] has a communitarian finality. (p. 8)

In addition to the theological importance of the community, my research is guided by the philosophical grounding of Gabriel Marcel (1937/1951/1967) who understands presence as participation: “To exist is to co-exist” he says (p. 205), and John Paul II (Cardinal Karol Wojtyla, 1976/1993), who informs my search with his understanding of community as a relationship of persons whose lived experience images the Trinitarian community of God, says:

To participate in the humanity of another human being means to be vitally related to the other as a particular human being, and not just related to what makes the other a human being. This is ultimately the basis for the whole distinctive character of the evangelical concept of neighbor.
(p. 237)

Our pedagogical stance is communal and strives to respect the contributions of all members of our community who have volunteered to share their personal encounters with our questions and answers. Palmer (1993) likens the search for truth to the intimate nuptial relationship of marriage: “We find truth by pledging our troth, and knowing becomes a reunion of separated beings whose primary bond is not of logic but of love” (p. 32). Our distance becomes the presence of a wedding feast in a banquet of text.

The Truth of the Elephant

Rumi (2004) contrasts the wisdom of the community in the search for truth with the limited singular vision of the individual. He also contrasts the knowledge of sense experience with wisdom that comes from openness to transcendent truth. The partial truths of the individual and the limitations of sensual data lead to mistaken identity. The poem portrays the wealth of a learning community open to the richness of divine truth. Rumi’s metaphor describes the online research community in their patient, persistent quest to reach understandings together about presence in distance through

the dancing of fingers on keyboards and the interpretation of words on computer screens in the mutual self-giving of presence in text.

Elephant in the Dark

Some Hindus have an elephant to show.
No one here has ever seen an elephant.
They bring it at night to a dark room.

One by one, we go in the dark and come out
Saying how we experience the animal.

One of us happens to touch the trunk.
"A water-pipe kind of creature."

Another, the ear. "A very strong, always moving
Back and forth, fan-animal."

Another the leg. "I find it still,
Like a column on a temple."

Another touches the curved back.
"A leathery throne."

Another, the cleverest, feels the tusk.
"A rounded sword made of porcelain."
He's proud of his description.

Each of us touches one place
And understands the whole in that way.

The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark are
how the senses explore the reality of the elephant.

If each of us held a candle there,
And if we went in together,
We could see it. (Rumi, 2004, p. 252)

Chapter Six thoughtfully reflects on our descriptions of the elephant in the dark as we reflect in the light of Christian faith and the embodiment of community in the richness of text. The pedagogical implications emerge from a consideration of parts and whole, of individual viewpoints against the essential themes of presence and community. We travel the road of lived experience in body, place, time, relationships, and technology in our effort to describe what it means to contemplate the face of Christ in the silence of cyberspace. In this chapter we listen to the ring of our call to “put out into the deep” of the Internet, as catechists summoned by the Church to “the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message” (John Paul II, 2002, *World Communications Day Message*, par. 2). We hear in these pedagogical reflections the call of other journeys and other questions.

Technology - Writing in the Dark

The elephant in Rumi’s 13th century poem is brought in at night to a dark room. Suspicion is a dark and subtle presence that hovers over the world of computer-mediated communication. Much of the writing and research about online learning and virtual presence gives the impression of dwelling in darkness, subterranean evil, and substandard education. Dr. Sherry Turkle (1984) suggests that computers mechanize our personalities the more time we spend connected to them, as reflected in our adaptation of computer language. Sister Timothy Prokes (2004) raises legitimate concerns about the meaning of presence for young people who opt to live vicariously through avatars, for adults who prefer to eat without the consequences of calories or fat through chemically constituted foods, for the human body whose parts are replaced with metal and plastic or enhanced with Silicone and Botox. What is the meaning of commitment, she asks, when we dwell in virtual worlds that can be “fashioned, re-fashioned, or exterminated at will” (p. 118)? These are questions that raise concerns about the dark side of technology.

Our conversations explore our identity as learners who must be connected to computers connected to the Internet, our electronic partners, to be present in distance. We ponder our relationships to our computers. Our conversations describe our feelings toward them, as well as the places where we connect to them, and the range of emotions that describe our intimate relationship to them. Dr. Cathy proclaims: “When technology does not work well, online learning can be a nightmare!” She reveals her humor in a description of a computer simulation she was required to pass for the American Board of Family Medicine:

The patient simulation was very crude. For my second module, I had chosen well-child care, and was presented with a three week old boy whom I was to manage until age 12. One section of the screening exam either was stuck or was meant to show developmental delay, since he had never advanced in certain landmarks; but the program wouldn’t allow a neuro consult. When I asked about feeding difficulty, I was told he did not have heartburn. When I asked about breastfeeding, it said, “I am a male.” When I asked about safety precautions (meaning gates, locks, pools, etc.) it said something about asking child-appropriate questions—there was no need for contraception. He finally reached age 12, apparently without my accidentally killing him. What a frustrating experience. I am uncertain what, if anything, I learned.

Deacon Jim, as a software developer, responds: “Yes, sometimes we write software that meets every specification, but doesn’t do what the client really needs.”

In spite of the dark, mysterious, anthropomorphic qualities that we attribute to computers, and the humor or frustration they sometimes cause, our research community was unanimous in its gratitude for life with such an amazing partner. Doorways and gateways were the metaphors we chose to describe how the computer invites us into a more intimate connection with the world. Only four researchers added anxiety to their list of descriptors in our conversations about technology. Only women shared humor about their relationship to technology; only men described technology as toys, and otherwise our rich conversation about technology was gender-neutral.

Each of us who admitted to ignorance of technology found ways to resolve it before we became online learners. Our knowledge was self-taught, provided by family members, or gained through professional training. As educators, however, our pedagogical stance calls us to question what is the relationship to technology for prospective learners? I recall a man in his 50's who bought a computer the night before he enrolled in an online seminar at CDU. Needless to say, we spent a great deal of time on the phone the first week. The presence of technology in the net of online learning calls us to question who casts online learning aside because we do not address the question of technology. Who do we cast aside when we do not address the presence of technology? What is our response to those who do not know how to dance on keyboards or do not have keyboards to dance on?

Gayle shares her decision to take an *Introduction to Computers* course before she begins her online Bachelor's degree program at CDU. She comments, "I am so glad I did. My experience on my home computer has mushroomed...I met my husband online so I guess my computer prowess was good enough for cyber courtship." Gayle's suggestion is supported by numerous research studies (Boston, 1992; Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena, 1994; Waddoups & Howell, 2002). Hillman, Willis, & Gunawardena emphasize, "Regardless of the proficiency level of the learner, inability to interact successfully with the technology will inhibit his or her active involvement in the educational transaction" (p. 34). They point out that taking an online course for the distance learner actually requires taking two courses: "One teaches the content and the other teaches the interface" (p. 35). After eight years of offering online education, CDU has decided to prepare an introductory course in information technology. However, with the increasing popularity of online learning, the comfort of young people with technology, and the variety of technologies being introduced, such a course may need to be recast frequently to reflect changing technologies and needs.

Keyboarding is another skill mentioned in the research community. Dr. Cathy thanks her mother for insisting she take personal typing before high school even though she was bound for medical school. "Keyboarding is a skill that is priceless. The words flow with ease off my fingertips," Dr. Cathy tells us. Another member of our research community admits spending twenty-five hours a week on his computer without knowing how to type. Our ability to dance on a keyboard expresses who we are as catechists of presence in distance. We need to attend to the ways our body supports our call. Dr. Cathy admits "...inability to type, and lack of basic computer and word-processing skills would make participation at CDU difficult." Parker Palmer (1993) notes that the "root meaning of *educate* is 'to draw out'" (p. 43); in computer-mediated learning, the body plays a direct and distinctive role in facilitating our learning online. As an educational institution whose name is *distance*, attending to the dance of the body is attending to the activity of mind and heart when the mission is to bring distance close and the face present.

Cyberspace - "A Water-Pipe Kind of Creature"

One of Rumi's explorers finds the trunk of the elephant and decides it is a "water-pipe kind of creature." What is the place where we dwell when we inhabit cyberspace? Is it as shapeless and formless as water? Lori describes how she imagines place:

I don't think of people inside my computer. I don't imagine a cyber place where everyone is. It is more of a web...that connects us. It is spiritual, touching the part of each other that is eternal.

A sense of place, a home, a meeting place that we inhabit needs to be present if we are learners called to live in a community. Even the design of a homepage for an online campus becomes "a home." Course management software has many features for managing knowledge and relationships, but it appears on a computer screen as an

abstract one-dimensional map punctuated with hyperlinks. The journey of the online learner combines the comfort of home for the body, but an abstract, one-dimensional frame of text and symbols is the place of our journey. What is the nature of an educational journey through hyperlinks on a computer screen? Casey (1993) describes the inherent connection between place and journey:

If being on a journey is to be in or among places, to be in a place is to be capable of journeying. Between places and journeys there is a relationship of mutual implication. (p. 289)

What kind of journey do we take in abstract text and symbols? How do we dwell in cyberspace? Casey (1993) describes the journey as a movement from place to place: "...Western and non-Western alike, memorable journeys consist of events in places" (p. 277).

Software engineers call the place where online learners dwell, a learning platform. *Platform* is French and means flat form, plain figure, a plane surface, a representation on the flat ground plan (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 2201). How do we dwell in a place called flat? Or surface? How does a flat form inform our journey? How does a flat form support a community?

Online learning platforms create cognitive spaces for educational transactions called discussion, lectures, and educational objects called syllabi, assignments, academic calendar, grade book, and hyperlinks to resources. Community is a list of email addresses. The online learning space resembles a map. It charts cognitive structures and activities; it maps the educational journey; we forfeit a connection to earth-bound place in hope for the more demanding and abstract reward of intellectual discovery. What is the cognitive map revealed in the learning platform? *Map* is Latin for "table cloth or napkin" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 1722), a link to the daily human and sacred event of a meal. Map is also a representation of the earth's surface, its physical

and political features, or refers to the mental conception of the arrangement of something.

What does the map of the learning platform reveal about the online learning space, and what does it reveal about our understanding of the online learner? What kind of cognitive meal is served on this map? How do we feast on cognitive space? Reflecting on my conversation at the Vatican with Dr. Soberón, I wonder, "How do we live '...a spirit of feast, sharing our own richness at this common table?'" (Soberón, 2007, p. 3). Heidegger (1953/1993c) warns:

But enframing does not simply endanger man in his relationship to himself and to everything that is. As a destining, it banishes man into the kind of revealing that is an ordering. Where this ordering holds sway, it drives out every other possibility of revealing. (p. 332)

What is revealed in the pedagogical relationship of learners and teachers who dwell in the platform of software engineers?

A CDU graduate student describes the online campus as having the look and feel of a real place. Davin remarks that his writing style changes to reflect his sense of place in the various rooms in the online campus. His educational journey feels real. CDU uses conferencing software for a course management system that promotes conversational learning. It lacks many of the features of course management systems, but it is simple to use and orients students with a sense of place, using names, photos of real places, such as the Chapel at CDU, art, poetry, and a map of the campus showing buildings, rather than diagrams.

Much more could be done, yet faculty and students are called into relationship through places that suggest the richness of human and divine presence. Life pulsates behind the flat frame of the computer screen. The linear campus map calls students to socialize in a Café whose banner features the outline of a steaming cup of coffee. The spiritual space, an online Chapel, includes a narthex for quiet conversation and an inner

chapel for posting prayer intentions and meditations from the online chaplain. There are multiple course rooms reflecting the academic program each semester for graduate and undergraduate students, online seminar spaces for three-week continuing education students, cohort rooms for cohort conversations to discuss academic issues for full-time students, and support areas that click to the Dean of Students' ongoing seminar on program completion strategies, the writing workshop, the *Welcome Book*, the *Student Handbook*. The online campus echoes the presence of the Dean of Students and an educational technologist who provides a twenty-four hour help desk. Dr. Cathy admits that when she enters the online campus it eases her loneliness and isolation in Northeast Ohio. Even though she prefers paper correspondence courses to online courses in her academic work, she is an active participant in the online campus and a visible and welcome presence in the online community. Her choices reveal the complexity of human personality.

Feeling at Home

What is the significance of creating a home space as a place in cyberspace for the online learner? Casey (1993) tells us that homes "are not physical locations but situations for living" (p. 300). Home can be created by objects such as a hearth, a coffee table, a bookcase or a TV that in his words are material objects that bear the weight of "localized caring" (p. 299). Bachelard (1958/1994) describes the significance of the house:

If I were asked to name the chief benefit of the house, I should say: the house shelters daydreaming, the house protects the dreamer, the house allows one to dream in peace...I must show that the house is one of the greatest powers of integration for the thoughts, memories, and dreams of mankind. (p. 6)

O'Donohue (1999) believes the "shelter of home liberates creativity and spirituality" (p. 71). In the vast, shapeless world of cyberspace, how do I, as an educator of presence in

distance, create the illusion of place? Borrowing from Rheingold (2000), how do we homestead on the electronic frontier of an online campus?

Casey agrees that homesteading “need not be literal or land-based” (p. 290) as long as it is a place where we can take up continuous occupancy. Casey explains: “In homesteading, then, we witness once more the deep alliance that can be effected between time and place” (p. 290). Rheingold describes his life in a virtual community called the WELL, as homesteading. He writes about the power of the electronic community and how it interacts and affects his life in the real community: “The WELL felt like an authentic community to me from the start because it was grounded in my everyday physical world” (p. xvi). In a similar way, because the web is such a vast, formless space we, as educators, need to address the ways that software can create spaces for collaboration, connection, communication, and community that feel human. Space needs to become a place for “localized caring” for the online learner. Just as the online research community maps their bodily experience in pajamas and coffee, the virtual experience can also create an atmosphere of intimacy and comfort that fosters learning by using metaphors of house and home. Bachelard (1958/1994) believes “...the house’s virtues of protection and resistance are transposed into human virtues. The house acquires the physical and moral energy of a human body” (p. 46). As educators of presence in distance, we are called to create an electronic home for learning, a house online that calls forth the richness and beauty of the human person who chooses to take the educational journey at home through the frame of a computer screen. Heidegger (1947/1993b) reminds us: “...language is the house of Being in which man ek-sists by dwelling...” (p. 237).

Lori informs the online research community that comfort for her as an online learner includes the opportunity to browse course rooms, course syllabi, calendars, and general requirements *before* a course begins. She likes to plan her schedule for the semester ahead of time and coordinate and prioritize her multiple roles as wife, mother,

and online learner. For Lori this is a matter of trust: “We are adult learners with busy lives and need to plan. How can seeing the syllabus be cheating? CDU should not project fear.”

Conrad (2002b) researches the nature of anxiety in students at the beginning of an online course. She finds that early access to the site reduces anxiety. Conrad’s study reveals that students did not need interaction initially, but familiarity with the course site, as an expression of feeling at home in a place. This phenomenon of anxiety is repeated with each new course. Anxiety is a type of homelessness. Leo reveals how he reconnoitered the online campus before his first online courses began:

I logged on several weeks before my first course to find my way around and found I only had access to the Café and Chapel. I made entries just to see how it worked. Imagine my surprise when I got immediate responses from Dr. Carrie (Dean of Students) and several students just to welcome me and say hi. The Café and Chapel are part of my normal checks when I enter the CDU campus. If I let them go several days (sometimes several dozen responses), I feel I have missed something important.

Davin comments, “The presence I experience of the same person can be different depending on the room in which he or she is speaking.” From the perspective of faculty and staff, giving students access to a course site ahead of time is problematic. But as we seek the lived experience of adult learners, we commit ourselves to listen in ways that show that a learning community cares about coming to an understanding of place. Rilke (1905/1996) in *Love Poems to God*, describes the presence of God envisioned as place:

You, the great homesickness we could never shake off,
You, the forest that always surrounded us,

You, the song we sang in every silence,
You, dark net threading through us... (p. 70)

We carry our rootedness in place with us to cyberspace.

Time - "A Fan-Animal"

One of the explorers in Rumi's poem finds the elephant's ear that is constantly moving. He concludes that the elephant is some kind of fan-animal. When we are asynchronous online learners, time is altered. What does our text reveal about the meaning of time? What does asynchronous time do to our text? Nancy reminds us that attentiveness to text enhances presence. Otherwise, presence seeps away silently like a slow leak in the expanse of time. The online research community calls asynchronous time the "luxury of time" because we dwell in the presence of twenty-four hours, rather than the presence of the embodied twelve-hour schedule of chronological time. The twenty-four clock is ideal for the study of theology, as its subtlety calls for deeper reflection and levels of thought.

We dwell in the tension of the luxury of time and the pressure of posting frequently enough to keep ourselves present in the online conversation. The elephant is a fan-animal, always moving. Deacon Jim believes the time pressure to keep our presence in posting is a drawback: "Discussion can carry on without you." You may return to a conversation to find that "the group has moved on." He also points out a benefit to online time: "A conversation can continue, develop new ideas, thoughts, and solutions, without any particular individual's presence." Online conversations seem to have a life of their own. Irene notes that several conversations can happen at the same time: "It looks like total chaos at first sight, but as long as you keep up with the postings, it sorts itself out."

The tension of dwelling in online time is taking the time to reflect, to edit, to leave and return, but living in the pressure of "keeping up," to keep one's presence present. As an online learner myself, I have witnessed how quickly a negative remark alters the conversation. The luxury of time is quickly transformed into the pressure of time for the facilitator of an online conversation.

Do we pose the question to new online learners of how to communicate in the tension of textual time in the asynchronous conversation? Do we explain to faculty how their feedback demonstrates the link between time and presence and the relationship between teaching presence and cognitive learning? Do we facilitate conversations to keep the community focused and not sidetracked? Nancy is frustrated at the appearance of ignoring Gayle: "While I was still busy working on my post above, Gayle posted hers but I didn't see it until I had finished. It looked like I was ignoring Gayle but I wasn't." Dr. Cathy explains to Nancy how to use the conferencing software to hold her place in the discussion thread: "I circumvent the problem by immediately posting my first few words, then clicking on "edit" and continuing. This reserves my place in line." Do we explain how to manipulate technology to enhance the human presence of community online? Lori responds to Dr. Cathy and Nancy: "Regarding simultaneous postings—I've always thought it was fun. It's another connection with each other, knowing that we are thinking about and writing about the same things at the same time—somewhere in cyberspace!" How does time build community?

We are Literature - "A Leathery Throne"

Another of Rumi's explorers touches the curved back of the elephant and declares that the elephant is a leathery throne. He takes note of the elephant's texture and shape and pronounces its identity as a throne. For the online research community, instead of focusing close at hand as pieces of digitized text, we have stepped back and called ourselves literature because we dwell in the permanent presence of written text. Presence in distance is the ability to compose text on a computer screen. Yet, something so essential to presence in distance as writing is taken for granted.

Gadamer (1960/1999) defines all written text as literature. He describes it as "the will to hand on...it is true of everything that has come down to us by being written down that here a will to permanence has created the unique forms of continuance that

we call literature” (p. 391). Permanence is a gift of scholarship and relationship in a learning community through the permanence of the written transcript of online communication that can be downloaded and printed at any time by any member of the online community. As Deacon Jim notes:

...the availability of the previous content of the conversation affects my communication. I love the fact that I can scroll back through the existing content to see what was already said, pull out quotes, etc. That way I am not repeating an earlier comment, making mistakes about what was said earlier, or attributing a comment to the wrong individual—at least I have that opportunity.

Online text-based communication is a trade-off from the immediacy of face-to-face conversation to the permanence of written text. In an academic setting, especially at the graduate level where discussion is vital to the process of coming to understandings, a written transcript of course discussion is invaluable. Course discussion becomes another permanent academic resource like books and articles.

Gayle expresses an opinion that online discussion is also more thoughtful and reflective, and consequently more beneficial in the study of theology. What is captured in permanent text actually reflects deeper thought, not just because of the “luxury” of asynchronous time, but because writing requires thinking through written language.

Researchers Garrison and Archer (2007) propose a theory of the community of inquiry as a model that measures the depth of critical thinking online; their research suggests that text-based, asynchronous communication has the potential for deep, critical thinking:

The use of the written word may encourage discipline and rigor, and the asynchronous nature of the communication may encourage reflection, resulting in more complex contributions to the discussion, demonstrating more advanced stages of critical thinking (Feenberg, 1989; Archer, Garrison & Anderson, unpublished). (Garrison & Archer, 2007, p. 4)

They emphasize “more basic research in this area is required if we are to understand and apply this knowledge” (p. 4). Their findings and our conversations about online

communication as art, as a con, suggest that more research is needed to better understand the relationship between critical thinking and online communication. What does poetry teach us about presence in the absence of words? What are the meaning structures in online communication that make brevity in posting enhance meaning? Garrison and Archer remind us: "The premise is that educators must first understand that online learning has unique properties that make it possible to create a critical community of learners not constrained by time or place" (p. 7). How do social presence and teaching presence influence critical thinking? In what ways do we allow technology to be our pedagogy, allowing the limitations of technology to dictate the ways we teach and learn?

Gadamer (1960/1999) describes the calling forth of new relationships in the hermeneutic dimension of written text: "What is fixed in writing has detached itself from the contingency of its origin and its author and made itself free for new relationships" (p. 395). These new relationships may reflect deeper levels of cognitive thought and awareness. Written text calls out the presence of the writer whose text addresses the reader and, in the response of the reader, new relationships are formed. As Lori reminds us, "Maybe we allow others to be present to us by how attentively we read." When presence dwells in text, writer and reader collaborate to an understanding and eventually may reach beyond cognitive understanding to the personal presence of the other. The persuasive presence of the body in face-to-face communication tends to hide the deeper, hidden dimensions of thought and personality.

What are the pedagogical implications of presence as literature in an online learning community? Writing is essential to presence in distance, and yet it is seldom confronted directly. CDU addresses it in two ways. Adult learners have a 150-word posting limit anywhere in the online campus, including academic, social, and spiritual spaces. Davin calls online communication an art. Learners become editors very quickly. When the rule is violated, a few gentle email reminders are sent by faculty or the Dean

of Students who monitors the social areas. Reminders also come from seasoned students to new students. On rare occasions, long postings are deleted.

The Dean of Students is also the Dean of Online Writing Skills. A formal acknowledgment of the priority of writing skills is the Dean of Student's practice of copying and pasting posts in emails to learners whose posts violate rules of grammar, syntax, and spelling. References are given to the item number in the online *Writer's Handbook*. In addition, the Dean of Students, who teaches program completion strategies to full-time learners, teaches academic writing skills and requires written assignments that demonstrate proficiency. The faculty has noted a marked improvement in all areas of writing at CDU. Attention to writing is attention to presence. Plans are underway to offer a remedial writing and composition course for undergraduates. Dr. Bill Dennis, a pediatrician who earned an MA degree at CDU in 2005, reminds us that he learned how to write at CDU; medical school taught him to take multiple choice exams, not to write well. Today Dr. Dennis has published numerous articles in medical journals since graduation. As an educator of presence in distance, how do I welcome students to the truth that presence is text?

We Speak in Silence

Writing is silent. Only the fingers make noise as they dance patterns of letters and words on the keys, but the noise is drowned in the drama of thought. Text-based communication creates a space for solitude. Palmer (1993) writes about the relationship between truth and silence: "To listen for the truth that seeks us, to hear it speak its own name, we must be silent not only in God's presence but in the presence of all we would know" (p. 120). Palmer distinguishes between silence and solitude: "If silence gives us knowledge of the world, solitude gives us knowledge of ourselves" (p. 121). Text places us in a space for both. Nancy comments on the dimension of faith that is present in our writing and reading of text:

In the online community it is the spiritual aspect of our human nature that communicates since there is an absence of material distractions. Our interaction becomes more like the spiritual exchange we each enjoy with God; it helps reveal who we are.

Pat responds: "...when we go online for our discussions, we are not distracted by material things...we become less encumbered...and learn to accept ourselves as God accepts us." Lori tells us, "Writing helps me create an open place to be present to God in prayer."

As an educator of presence in distance, how do I make the silence of text become an invitation to a deeper presence that recognizes God's presence in my silence? O'Donohue (1999) believes that the presence of longing in each person reflects the divine longing for us: "Our longing is an echo of the divine longing for us. Our longing is the living imprint of divine desire" (p. 96). Rilke (1905/1996) writes "All creation holds its breath, listening within me, because, to hear you, I keep silent" (p. 65). How do we hear the spoken word of God in the silence of our text?

The Echo of Presence

In a research community of catechists, I pose this question to help us reflect on how to make God present in the distance of our education. Their answers reflect practical wisdom gained from life in the natural world and a presence of God that naturally imbues both worlds. Their thoughts move easily between both worlds because presence for them is a single supernatural presence that illuminates all other presences. Debbie reminds us that *catechesis* is a re-echo of God's word dwelling in us. She links the natural and supernatural through study infused with prayer. She suggests searching for understanding in academic study through listening to the Church's Scriptural readings of the day in the liturgy. Finally, as others concur, Debbie suggests sharing our knowledge with another, to measure what we have learned. Sharing

increases our charity, and faith increases in the mind and heart of the listener. The economy of God always bears much more, not just more.

Pat views presence as a dynamic of change and constancy. "Each day is a new adventure, a change, yet God is constant and unchangeable," she says. We live in the permanence of text as a dynamic of change and permanence, while yearning for permanence. The knowledge we gain in the study of theology helps us to yearn for the stability and simplicity of God. Pat suggests accepting our online educational journey with its rewards and challenges as part of the permanent plan of God. Nancy uses simple but rich verbs to describe what it means to contemplate the face of Christ online for her: seek, read, study, listen, share, meditate, and apply. Leo also links study to prayer. Palmer describes prayer as "the practice of relatedness" (p. 124). He calls it the way of paradox: "a way of entering into silence so deeply that we can hear the whole world's speech" (p. 124). Leo is practical, as a single father of five, and reminds us, "Don't take anything for granted. Research everything, and don't try to take on too much."

Lori believes listening is very important in online communication: "Listen, really listen to the writing of others. If you disagree, wait twenty-four hours to pray and think before responding." Her final suggestion is to prioritize. Spouse and family come first. Her concern for priorities reflects the powerful pull of online communication in textual conversations that make us present to those who are distant. Davin does not study at night because that is family time. Adult learners who seek the face of Christ are called to the truth of priorities.

Gayle wonders if her academic study of theology has really become part of the core of her identity. Without the "laboratory" of life Gayle questions the value of her education. "Christ is missing if it all just swims around in our heads without hands, feet and mouths." She wonders if we need an internship or lab in the study of theology to make sure it doesn't stay swimming in our heads. Davin responds: "Gayle, I feel like I

am in the lab all of the time.” He describes a conversation with a colleague at his college, who that day questioned the divinity of Christ. Davin insists, “The lab is everywhere!” How has Gail’s positivist vocabulary imposed distinctions that build walls between knowledge and love? How do we as educators challenge learners to embody education and become the face of Christ for others? How do we become the face of Christ for our students?

Learners – “A Column on a Temple”

In Rumi’s (2004) poem about the elephant, another explorer discovers one of the elephant’s legs. “I find it still, like a column on a temple” he says. An elephant’s leg is not still for long, and if adult learners were columns on a temple, each column would be unique. Davin is a college professor who tries to help his students learn as much as possible about themselves and how they learn best. Davin tells us: “I believe it is important that we know how we learn. I tell my college students that they need to figure out how they learn best because they will need to be learning the rest of their lives. “

As the research community reveals more and more about themselves, we discover how rich and varied are the ways we learn and adapt. In Moore’s theory of transactional distance in distance education, even with high levels of dialogue in student-to-student and student to instructor interaction, technology and text-based communication impose types of structure that differ from face-to-face interaction. How do we as educators and administrators make visible the links between online structure and online learners? With limited resources and staff how do we welcome variety in the regimentation of technology?

Davin’s call to “know yourself” is a thread that weaves in and out of our conversations. His call calls forth more questions for other journeys exploring relationships between learning and technology, between specific learning outcomes and

specific learning styles, the differences in delivering and facilitating content such as theology, or accounting. What about the question between learning styles of faculty reflected in their styles of online teaching with the rich variabilities of learners and the limited variability in technology?

At CDU we mistakenly conclude that students who take paper-based courses do not like online communication. The truth may be hidden somewhere within the complexities of online learner variability and faculty facilitation of online discussion. The question is complex and needs further research.

In the relationship that develops between teacher and learner, what are the modes of revealing in our practice of teaching and learning? How does course content influence modes of teaching and learning? How do teacher and learner come to an understanding in digitized text? Heidegger (1927/1993a), quoting Husserl, reminds us that in phenomenology we come to an understanding by turning “‘To the things themselves!’” (p. 72); in the online learning community we turn “‘To the words themselves!’”

In online education, technology enables us to offer more and more choices of learning formats that appeal to the visual, auditory, or kinesthetic modes of learning and challenges students to achieve success by learning how they learn best. Gayle tells us, “I am a horrible auditory learner. I can identify the tunes of songs but seldom remember the lyrics. I see there is one history course at CDU with lectures on CD-Rom. That would never work for me.” Davin believes that CDU has helped him discover that he learns best by reading and writing. Although he admits to being a poor speller and grammarian, writing essays help him learn: “The essays help me to understand better, even though writing them makes my brain hurt at times.” He uses the word processor’s edit and spelling features for the composition of essays before he emails them to professors.

Debbie was a science major, trained to be a careful observer. It taught her to be an observer of faces. She learned to do labs, not write papers. "I would rather talk than write," she tells us. "I learn better from listening than reading." She prefers the classroom to the online class. "I find I can communicate with some people just by looking at their eyes and facial expressions." For Debbie, the best communication needs few words or no words. For Deacon Jim both the immediacy of a face-to-face class and the permanence of the online transcript appeal to him.

Knowing ourselves includes how our bodies live chronological time. Davin tells us he does his best academic work early in the morning: "My mind seems to work much better in the mornings, and that is prime time for my reading and posting at CDU." Gayle finishes studying by 9 pm and begins as early as 5:30 am. Nancy confesses she has no daily schedule, and that's what she likes about online learning. Irene, as a mother of seven, confesses to studying in the grocery store and at McDonald's. Pat writes papers and studies for exams after 8 p.m. when her youngest children are in bed.

"Know yourself," Davin reminds us. Gayle says, "...I am a bit of an explorer at heart." She likes digging for understanding in the independence of paper-based courses more than online courses: "The paper format requires a certain degree of self structure externally provided by the online format. I have always been good at self discipline." Dr. Cathy's training in medical school has given her the ability to structure her time and stay on a schedule. She also prefers paper courses because they relieve the pressure of time and online discussion. She is chronically ill and needs flexibility.

As an educator of distance, how well do I consider the implications of various distance formats for students and faculty? In an editorial in the *American Journal of Distance Education*, Editor Michael Grahame Moore (2007b) gives the following advice:

...First make sure there is as wide a range of alternative teaching and learning strategies and alternative media as can be afforded, so that each student can find what best suits him or her; second, give students enough freedom to make those

choices...What matters is that by the end of the course each student achieves the learning objectives, not how he or she got to that standard. (p. 2)

Do our students take priority over learning, and does learning take priority over technology? What are the conversations that help learners become present to themselves as learners? How do we make technology the servant of our learning? In what ways do we treat learners as still columns of a temple?

Faculty - "A Rounded Sword Made of Porcelain"

The solitude of the online journey reveals the truth of presence as community. Academically, the most significant community for the online learner is the relationship formed with the online teacher, a member of the faculty. *Faculty* is Latin and means power, ability, or opportunity to do anything. It means to possess an executive ability, and can refer to a body of masters and doctors in a field of study like theology or medicine (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 948). Rumi (2004) describes the last of the explorers of the elephant who calls himself *cleverest*. Rumi calls him proud. In our educational community, the faculty identity is *cleverest* and sometimes even proud.

Nancy describes a memorable experience with a faculty member:

In one online course I was quite upset for several days, fuming and crying after a condescending post from an instructor in response to an innocent question I posed. Regarding this instructor's responses to other students, I felt so sorry for one student that I contacted the student personally for encouragement. I never mentioned it in the course evaluation because it was filled out before final grades were posted...the instructor may teach another course I will need in the future.

Dr. Cathy describes the stress of starting a new course: "I especially struggle with teaching styles. I do better with clear expectations, more focus..." Garrison and Archer (2007) whose research assesses the quality of collaboration and thinking in asynchronous online classes emphasize the importance of the teacher: "...teaching presence is crucial for realizing intended learning outcomes" (p. 6). Referencing the

work of Anderson, Rourke, Garrison, and Archer (2001), they define teaching presence as “the design, facilitation, and direction of cognitive and social processes for the purpose of realizing personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” (p. 6).

The weightless disembodied presence of the online community places greater weight on the textual link between learner and teaching presence. Conversations in our research community about faculty reveal how significant faculty are to “personally meaningful and educationally worthwhile learning outcomes” in the net of our computer-mediated communication. The online research community shares their strongest emotions in conversations about faculty. How does online education change the role and identity of faculty? How does it change relationships between teacher and learner? In what ways do faculty become learners and learners become teachers?

Dr. Cathy reveals a wide range of emotions and experiences with faculty. She shares a “melt-down” in the first week of a course in moral theology and the encouragement of the Dean of Students and another faculty member who gave her “...a cyber version of shaking me by the collar yelling, ‘Get a grip!’” At another point in the conversation, she describes a philosophy professor who “intentionally humiliated me before the class. I felt overwhelmed and abandoned throughout. The professor was condescending, focusing on the brighter students, encouraging competitiveness.” Lori acknowledges Dr. Cathy and shares her own misunderstandings with faculty:

I also felt humiliated by a professor once where my personal experience was dismissed. I felt trivialized in front of my classmates. I walked around the house fuming for days. I, too, felt intimidated to email the professor privately because of grades. I never responded online. Shouldn’t we be able to discuss controversial issues at the graduate level? I backed off from posting and was very guarded.

Rarely do online learners as a group discuss faculty, unlike traditional learners who might gather at Starbuck’s to talk. Every story reveals the importance of the community

that forms between teacher and learner. The empathy that each story arouses calls forth another story. Palmer (1993) describes community as “the nature of reality, the shape of our being” (p. 122).

Faculty facilitation, the ability to make learning facile for the online learner, is critical to learning outcomes that depend on a strong sense of community between faculty and learners. Deacon Jim describes styles of facilitation that reflect instructor involvement and enhance or detract from learning. He describes the instructor who only logs on once a week to reflect on a week of comments. “This caused a bit of anxiety,” Deacon Jim explains as the discussion had ended. The other instructor commented during the week, and Deacon Jim comments: “We had discussion that was better guided; we could move on to delve more deeply into the issues and questions.” However, the research community and Deacon Jim preferred the facilitation style of our research community that included weekly conversation and a weekly summary, provided for them during our research process as a way of giving back to them the meanings in their text that called to me. Deacon Jim commented: “I find myself seeing things in the summary that I either missed or want to review, and I can go back through the discussion to find the related posts. Much better for my learning!”

The relationship between teaching and learning at CDU is acknowledged only informally by the academic deans. Faculty learn on the job how to transfer their teaching call from the classroom to the online world. In the reciprocal relationship with learners, text reveals anger, hurt, and humiliation. The tacit understanding of the call to teach is that the medium of communication—in this case, technology and text, do not affect the relationship of learning between teacher and student. Yet, our conversations reverberate anger, withdrawal, hurt, in memories of online facilitation. Lori calls it the absence of the face of Christ:

I think professors really need to be trained for this online learning experience. There is so much potential here. It is a new experience for most of our professors. I think an online course in 'How to Teach Online' would help many 😊.

Garrison and Archer (2007) raise new questions about faculty facilitation that call for new paths of research linking teaching presence to higher-order learning:

Certainly the literature suggests that a stronger teaching presence is required in online learning (Garrison & Cleveland-Innes, 2005; Meyer, 2003; Shea, Li, Swan, & Pickett, in press). Teaching presence shapes cognitive and meta-cognitive processing. Teachers must be able to understand and design learning activities that facilitate higher-order learning outcomes. (p. 9)

What are the relationships of learning that are severed in the faculty facilitation that is not facile? How does presence create relationships open to learning? How does online communication sever relationships? What are the journeys called forth in these questions for faculty?

Faculty identities change in text-based computer-mediated education. Embodied authority is reduced to text and grades. Following a presentation I made to faculty at a Pontifical University in Rome in 2001 about offering three-week online interactive seminars, I was told that their faculty would not be comfortable in online teaching relationships. They are accustomed to lecturing in auditoriums and answering previewed questions on a stage. The Dean was very perceptive—faculty relationships with students change online.

How do they change? Content expertise is posted, rather than lectured or delivered. The authority of the voice, the face, and the stance, is reduced to text. Faculty interact frequently with students in a one-on-one mentoring relationship through email as well as communicating to the class as a whole; announcements are posted for the whole class, but the teaching process lived out in shared text is permanent and has greater intimacy than the ephemeral life of spoken dialogue. As our conversations

reveal, when the learner's perception of the dialogue lacks intimacy and encouragement, feelings reverberate negativity in the learning relationship.

When discussion is facilitated well, faculty respond to the whole class, but through individual responses to learners, with the knowledge that the post will benefit everyone. The relationship feels more personal. Students have the liberty to email questions and comments directly to the instructor, which is less threatening and more inviting than speaking up in class. Equality of access in the online course works simultaneously for faculty and students.

Mentor is Latin and is related to *monitor*. It means advisor, trusted counselor, remembered agent. It originated in the *Odyssey* and was the name of the Ithican noble whose disguise was assumed by the goddess Athene in order to act as the guide and advisor to young Telemachus (Oxford English Dictionary, 1971, p. 1771). Davin tells me he is a facilitator: "God has given me the gift of facilitation...As the facilitator, it is my job to get people talking and sharing, much like you are doing in this online discussion. I feel that I have been successful when I don't have to say much." Lori adds, "I am primarily a facilitator for church groups. We are all mostly introverts. I am wondering if this gift is present in other members of our research group?" I tell her, "Yes, I am an introvert, too."

Unlike Davin, most faculty do not suffer from not having much to say. Yet, in the online class, more responsibility falls on the shoulders of the learner. Dr. Cathy reminds us, "I feel I would have learned more if I could have managed my own studies...I much prefer working independently." Malcolm Knowles (1975), renowned adult educator, used the term *andragogy*, conceptualizing it as the "art and science of helping adults learn" (p. 19) as opposed to *pedagogy*, which traditionally describes teacher-directed learning in the education of children. He describes the unique characteristics of the adult learner who is self-directing rather than just teacher-directed. These differences include a self image convinced of the capability to learn, a wealth of life experience, a

problem-solving approach to learning, access to resources, the ability to set goals, and internal motivation (p. 68).

Most adult learners at CDU are at least forty years old and have achieved success in various professions. They look to faculty for content expertise and facilitation to understand the content from their own professional and vocational stance. *Facilitate* is French and means to render easy, to promote, help forward, to simplify. Although the qualities of facilitation are always welcomed by students, faculty identity is linked more to the etymological roots of *faculty* as scholarship, expertise, power, aptitude for executive abilities. In the online campus, stature, voice, aura, even the arrangement of furniture in a typical classroom, is reduced to text; in online relationships between students and faculty, students have easier access to faculty and a perception of more equality.

Thus, faculty who choose to teach online become learners before they can be teachers in this new medium of education. The power in the name, *faculty*, may hide the anxiety of changed roles, and discomfort in the new bond with technology. As Rumi tells us, the last explorer was proud, yet Dr. Cathy reminds us, "It is a humbling experience, being a student again; but humility itself can be a means of spiritual growth." Online learners frequently are more experienced in online communication and technology than faculty. How well do we understand that to be present in distance, teachers also need to be learners?

I asked the research community to imagine themselves as teachers to faculty. What do online learners want online faculty to know about online learning? They agree that faculty should log on daily, if possible, with a short post but a minimum of every two days. They like personal stories from faculty, humor, honesty, encouragement. Faculty need to respect online turnaround time, and respond timely. These learners would teach them to organize discussion, and not refuse to answer questions, even if a question has already been asked. Discussion is for teaching, not showing off.

Faculty should not humiliate or intimidate. Dr. Cathy comments, "I found daily interaction with the professor during my one online course to be very stressful...Each instructor has a different style. Some provide immediate email responses to questions while others seem like ghosts." In another thread of our conversation Dr. Cathy tells us, "The CDU instructors have a real presence, which was never felt face-to-face at Case Western Reserve, a large, urban university with no personal touch." Another graduate student says, "Imitate the Dean of Students." Davin describes the Dean of Students: "There is an overall presence of Dr. Cirbee, as I know she is always keeping track of what's going on; even though I haven't met her in person, I consider her a friend." Pat calls Dr. Cirbee a mentor: "Dr. Cirbee functions in that role for us which must keep her busy all the time."

Pat gravitates to the role of mentor. "Why can't MA graduates volunteer to mentor new students? Pat explains:

A graduate is someone who has the experience firsthand. Perhaps mentors could be assigned according to geographical proximity for the chance to meet face-to-face. I personally would love to meet with anyone who has made such a commitment as this. We are interesting people!

How can relationships between faculty and students be mentored? How does scholarship become a practice of the community and not just a practice of the faculty? How do we facilitate mentoring in an online community?

Psychologist, Patricia Wallace (1999), of Johns Hopkins University, describes a version of the Myers Briggs personality inventory used to learn more about online impression formation. The results show common misperceptions about warmth and coldness online. She comments:

What we type is not quite what we would say in person...We don't just appear a little cooler, testier, and disagreeable because of the limitations of the medium. Online, we appear to be less inclined to perform those little civilities common to social interactions. Predictably, people react to our cooler, more task-oriented

impression and respond in kind. Unless we realize what is happening, an escalating cycle begins...(p. 17)

Reactions to faculty reflect a heightened sensitivity to warmth or coldness as the learning community holds on to the tenuous threads of the network to form relationships with faculty that are so significant to learning. How do we mentor the text of online communication between students and faculty? What can we do to change the temperature? The bond between online faculty and online learners echoes the call of ongoing questions for researchers because of the strength of the bond. Perhaps as more online instructors emerge from a growing body of online learners, the relationships of faculty and students will be better understood.

The Meaning of the Truth

Rumi's 13th Century poem about the elephant in the dark contrasts different ways of knowing. He describes the knowing of sense experience: "The palm and the fingers feeling in the dark." This is a way of knowledge that we who choose to be present in distance forego to be present at all times in all places, and to address ourselves to all faces. Education continues to adapt new technologies to develop better ways to simulate the traditional face-to-face class, but we who are present in distance question the relevance of this kind of class for us. Technology has enabled us to be in class all the time in the comfort of home. Rumi reveals the secret of knowing that leads to the truth: "If each of us held a candle there, and if we went in together, we could see it" (2004, p. 252). The elephant, as a metaphor for the educational journey, is revealed in the candle and the community. We need both the candle whose light is not ours, and the wisdom of the community. As I reflect on the journey of presence in distance in the final chapter of the dissertation, I discover that Rumi's poem lights a pedagogical path of knowing that helps me to "see" the phenomenon in new ways and yet brings me back to where I started. This is the meaning of the truth.

Chapter One invited me to name the question that calls to me in the pedagogical relationship that expresses my identity as distance educator and catechist. The call of my question echoed in autobiographical reflections, in my retelling of the history of distance education in the United States, and in its connections to the sources of my faith in the Catholic Church. The lure of my question is the light of a computer screen that draws me into digitized text that has opened my mind and heart to a new community of learners who have joined me in the bonds of a real community that searches the hidden realities of presence in search of the face of Christ.

I also am lured by the voice of Peter, a fisherman whose net was cast by John Paul II in the call to “put out into the deep” of the Internet on the threshold of the new millennium. John Paul II, a Vicar of Christ, was a phenomenologist whose text calls me to the wonder of lived experience in the encounter with God. His text calls cyberspace a “summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel” (*World Communications Day Message*, 2002, par. 2). Lori calls us pioneers: “I like to think of us as pioneers, forging new paths into expansive and wonderful territories! We are breaking new ground.” We discover the presence of God in the distance of technology. We contemplate the face of Christ in the presence of distance. Rilke (1905/1996) expresses our passion that dwells beyond the knowing of sense experience:

Extinguish my eyes, I'll go on seeing you.
Seal my ears, I'll go on hearing you.
And without feet I can make my way to you,
Without a mouth I can swear your name.

Break off my arms, I'll take hold of you
With my heart as with a hand.
Stop my heart, and my brain will start to beat.
And if you consume my brain with fire,
I'll feel you burn in every drop of my blood. (p. 111)

In Chapter Two the phenomenon of presence in distance is explored through the poetry of Rainer Maria Rilke and Emily Dickinson whose own quiet life hid a lively, searching intellect that mirrors the excitement of the online learning community hidden in text and in the silence of our pounding computer keys, as we meander through many dimensions of presence in our online community. A review of the current research on presence and its theories in the field of distance education helped to situate my own research interests. It defined and documented the phenomenon and has helped to clarify the rendering of lived experience and what it reveals that remains hidden in other research methodologies.

Van Manen (2003) describes research as being involved with text: “To do research, to theorize, is to be involved in the consideration of text, the meaning of dialogic textuality and its promise for pedagogy—” (p. 151). He explains that the demands of a human science text must be “oriented, strong, rich, and deep” (p. 151). His hermeneutic phenomenological method guides my study of the phenomenon and thrusts me into a world that only reveals its truth in the writing and re-writing of text. Dwelling in text is the essence of presence in the online learning community and speaks the presence of God in sacred Text. I am at home in this research orientation, as it calls me to a way of seeking truth in the process of writing text that never fails to reveal its secrets to me. It calls me to reflect on my own story of presence and absence in the death of two husbands. I find presence in their distance through the faces of children and grandchildren and share their silence in the solitude of writing text through which they now speak to me.

The research process has validated and disciplined my way of searching for understandings. Van Manen (2003) has also helped me to delineate the significance of a pedagogical orientation to the world. He has helped me to understand the meaning of my joy as a teacher and the call to be a distance educator and catechist.

Chapter Three invited me to explore the philosophical roots of my question and a method that would help to uncover its depths. I am especially grateful for the writings of Heidegger (1947/1993b) for whom being is presence, and truth is *alētheuein*, “a mode, that is, of rendering beings manifest” (p. 244). Gadamer (1960/1999) inspired my search for meaning in conversation as coming to an understanding, and “the miracle” of written text. Catholic phenomenologists such as Gabriel Marcel (1937/1951/1967), John Paul II writing as Cardinal Wojtyła (1976/1993) and, more recently, the writings of philosopher and phenomenologist, Monsignor Robert Sokolowski (1994), have helped me to interpret lived experience in the context of faith.

Chapters Four and Five have been the most challenging in their call to render the meaning of the lived experience in the research community’s eight week journey of presence in text. In Chapter Four we reflect on our relationship to technology, to the meaning of the lived existential of body, place, time, and others in the computer-mediated world where we dwell. We reflect on the ways we are present in our written text, and the meaning of community in a virtual world and in the Church. We also reflect on how our online community influences our face-to-face communities of home, parish, and neighborhood.

Chapter Five confronts the reality of our call as catechists to contemplate the face of Christ through online study and what it means to ring out our call to proclaim the face of Christ when we dwell in an online community. We discuss the ways it has formed us, enriched us, and what it has denied us in the absence of our embodied presence. We talk about the ways that Christ has been present in the online community at CDU and where he has been absent. We envision how the online community reaches throughout the world, and our hopes for the Church’s mission of evangelization in the third millennium using technologies and visions of community such as ours. These thoughts ring loudly in our catechetical identity. Pat captures the real presence of our transformation when she says, “We must take the lived, dynamic experience from our

online community and transform others so they too may share in the enthusiasm we feel. Have others experienced what it means to be thrilled by Christ, as we have?" And Lori's final words to our group reveal the power of presence she experienced and the meaning of her text in saying good-bye:

I want to leave you all with my gratefulness. I am thankful for our willingness to be vulnerable in this setting. Thank you for sharing difficult parts of your lives and for striving for authenticity. I have experienced the face of Christ here more deeply than anywhere else online. I think especially your willingness to be vulnerable reveals Him and creates a special bond in our humanity. He [Christ] shared this vulnerability.

Ultimately the truth of our text will be confirmed in the reverberations of the research community beyond the phenomenological journey that has ended. In what way does their experience of presence in the online community reverberate in other communities and on other faces where they are present? What meanings have we revealed about the online learning experience of presence and community and its relevance to other online communities? What have we learned about fostering human presence that enriches human life in general? How will we make CDU reflect the face of Christ for us and for others?

The mystery of presence in the limits of computer-mediated communication in a learning community constituted in text, ultimately reverberates the mystery of Christ whose real presence dwells in a sacramental presence of consecrated unleavened bread. It is repeated in the mystery of sacred Text, which is the living word of God, and the primary presence of God for Protestants. As Catholics believe that the Trinitarian God dwells in the soul, then it is not surprising that devout Christians in the online learning community at CDU who have been called to be catechists, recognize the face of Christ in the text of our community. This is Rumi's candle that burns brightly and reveals the light of our presence more and more clearly through the reflections of faith expressed in our text. The light of our minds and hearts is merely a reflection to us of divine light, a

reality that others may question, and we answer in the joy on the face of our text. That is how we become the face of Christ for others.

At the end of the journey I realize that the mystery of my question resides in the net. The net is what constitutes the online community through our network connected to the Internet. The net is also a metaphor for the fisherman's net of first century Palestine used by Christ to explain how the faith would spread throughout the world. It is also a metaphor for community whose truth is revealed on many levels throughout this study. Conversation, Gadamer (1960/1999) explains, is coming to an understanding that calls forth a new community in what is revealed. Textual interpretation, as the net of the online learning community, creates a web of relationships and understandings that bond the members of the community or weaken them.

Heidegger (1927/1993a) defines *logos* as "letting something be seen" and "what is addressed, as something that has become visible in relation to something else, in its 'relatedness' *logos* acquires the meaning of a relationship with and relating to something" (p. 80). The pedagogical importance of the net as a metaphor for human relatedness in distance education is the need to attend to presence as a phenomenon of community. Palmer (1993) explains the significance of community in the context of a spiritual community:

The community is a check against my personal distortions...but life in community is also a continual testing and refining of the fruits of love in my life...The community is a discipline of mutual encouragement and mutual testing, keeping me both hopeful and honest about the love that seeks me, the love that I seek to be. (p. 18)

The research community in the field of distance education should continue to be a community of mutual encouragement, hope, and honesty in the testing of empirical findings and the search for the meaning of the findings as we better understand the uniqueness of the educational transaction I call presence in distance.

I hope that this research journey has contributed to the unencumbrance of the mantle of face-to-face teaching as the model for adult education, as Moore's theory of transactional distance helped me to see that all educational transactions involve distance and presence. I hope these findings will encourage distance educators and their institutions to energetically proclaim what makes computer-mediated distance education unique, its presence in distance, and the ways it facilitates learning and challenges knowing to go beyond the physical and sensual to the realm of the transcendent where distance becomes a powerful presence. I hope that learning communities will reflect humility in the community of teacher and learner, as distance education is a relationship of teaching and learning that reflects the humility of disembodied presence and an equality of persons in the presence of text. I hope the net of the educational network on the Internet reflects the richness of a community defined by invitation rather than identity.

As a catechist of presence in distance, I ring out the truth that the research community became heralds of presence and revealed the face of Christ to one another in the distance of their digitized text. May the truth of their text be an invitation to further research to explore cyberspace as a command from Christ to put out into the deep:

Cyberspace is, as it were, a new frontier opening up at the beginning of this new millennium. Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise, and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change. (John Paul II, 2002, *World Communications Day Message*, par. 2)

Rumi (2004) warns, "If we went in together, we could see it" (p. 252). The research community participants have become missionaries of cyberspace who reveal that the call is a gift. The net of the Internet extends the net of the learning community beyond the boundaries of embodied presence, to enlarge the community beyond the boundaries of place. John Paul II (2001) invites us to go together to see it, to "put out in the deep" (*Novo Millennio Ineunte*, p. 7), through technology, to be present in distance, to heed the

call of our longing to belong. The shape of the call is a net, and the community of our longing is communion; the presence of our text is a feast.

Implications for Further Research

Very little research exists that explores the dimension of faith and presence in an online learning community. The evidence of the data from this study reveals the strength of communal bonds that formed in eight weeks solely through computer-mediated communication. The text of this community revealed what a strong metaphor the net became as a way to describe the phenomenon of presence in a technologically-mediated community consciously open to the transcendent experience of contemplating the face of Christ. To further uncover the phenomenon, longitudinal studies could follow a selected number of volunteers from this research community or other learning communities to explore further the implications of presence in distance over time, and how it bears on faith development in both the technologically-mediated and face-to-face communities of participants. Online learning in a faith-based community which is open to the transcendent dimension of being, augments the meaning of presence found in the literature.

The technological dimension of presence in computer-mediated learning calls for further study in the use of non-text-based media and virtual environments for educational purposes. How do virtual personas in virtual environments influence human presence in education?

The implications for practice suggest a number of data-driven recommendations including further attention to metacognition for both learner and teacher, the importance of faculty facilitation, attention to issues of language and writing skills in text-based communication, and notions of time and place that facilitate learning and strengthen bonds of community. In addition, Rumi's reference to the light of holding a candle suggests the richness of other ways of knowing that attend to the non-visual

senses, and to cultural traditions that enhance the face of Christ for the theological community.

The conduct of this inquiry offers additional insights such as the need to attend to information literacy skills that would enable a global community to participate more fully, such as keyboarding, word processing, and file management. How can research help to illuminate the complexities of greater inclusivity? Attention given to “info-poverty” as described by the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Archbishop Celli, would enable participants without similar material resources to participate in an online learning community dependent on technology. The call of the online community that contemplates the face of Christ is a universal call to be present through technology that reflects an experience of divine presence. The truth of Rumi’s candle as a light reveals the learning community as the web of a net that becomes a feast in the shared richness of each learner, a *communio*, because we learn together in response to the call of Christ.

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APPENDIX A
AN INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Marianne Evans Mount
mmount@cdu.edu

July 2007

Dear Online Students at CDU,

I invite you to join me in a research study that explores the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community. I am conducting this research as a Ph.D. candidate in the area of Adult Learning and Human Resource Development Program in the Department of Human Development at Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University under the direction of Professor Marcie Boucouvalas, Chair and Advisor of my Dissertation Committee.

Although a growing body of research in distance education is addressing the phenomenon of group development and collaborative learning in web-based computer mediated learning communities (Carabajal, LaPointe, & Gunawardena, 2007; Conrad, 2005; Harasim, 1995), there is a dearth of research from the perspective of the students themselves, and very little research on its use for adult faith formation.

As many of you know, the official catechetical documents of the Church since the Second Vatican Council have increasingly emphasized the importance of adult faith formation carried out in the context of community. Your participation in this research study will help to uncover the catechetical implications for adult faith formation carried out in an online learning community. The results of this research will help us to understand more deeply the experience of adult faith formation from the perspective of adults themselves, and the impact of computer-mediated technology that enables the formation of online learning communities.

As I seek to understand this experience, I am inviting you to participate in an online discussion forum with me in the CDU Online Campus, especially arranged for this study. You will be asked to reflect on your experiences, share parts of your own biography that bear on why you have chosen online learning for your own adult faith

formation, and engage in conversation with the other participants and myself beginning in July 2007 and ending in early September 2007.

To respect the confidentiality of your participation, the forum will be set up in a secure site with access only by username and password to those who consent to participate. You will not be identified by name in any published findings or in oral presentations unless you choose to have your name revealed. You will be invited to adopt an alias for the purposes of my writing. If you would be more comfortable using an alias even during the secure online discussion, that can be arranged. After the research is complete, you will be invited to review the results.

The research method I am using is based on hermeneutic phenomenology, a human science that studies the uniqueness of the human person in a particular pedagogical relationship. This method has been developed by Dr. Max van Manen, a phenomenologist and educator in the Department of Education at the University of Alberta, Canada. He is originally from the Netherlands. More information about van Manen's method is available at www.phenomenologyonline.com.

Some of you have already been kind enough to engage with me in general conversations about your experience as an online student at CDU. These conversations helped me to formulate my research topic, and offered great descriptive insights about the experience. I am very grateful for your help, and I am now hoping that other CDU learners in the BA or MA degree programs in theology or the Catechetical Diploma program will come forward.

I will need between five and eight adult learners to participate in the study. I am seeking volunteers in one of our full-length programs because you will likely have had more experience with online learning at CDU and will not find the time commitment for the research study (a total of four and a half hours in eight weeks) too imposing, given your commitment to a full-length degree or diploma program at CDU.

Once I have received an email from you indicating your willingness to participate, I will mail you a consent form that must be signed and returned to me in a pre-addressed, postage paid envelope. Then I will contact you through email to conduct a short interview to learn more about you and your background. Following the email interviews, you will be sent a login and password to the secure discussion forum to begin the conversations in the next few weeks. I will post questions in the online discussion forum, and our journey together researching and exploring the topic of adult faith formation and presence in an online community will begin!

After your consent form is received, you will be asked to choose an alias for the study, so your identity will remain confidential for the study, and anonymous to readers. Personal identities will be guarded by me and kept offsite for a period of seven years. Periodically I will be printing our discussion transcripts to better understand the themes that emerge. I will share these summaries with you so we can explore even more deeply the meaning of our lived experience. This is a typical method of phenomenological research. You may leave the research study at any time with no consequences.

Thank you once again for participating with me in this research investigation that will provide rich data on the lived experience of membership in an online learning community, how we make ourselves present to one another, and how the various aspects of the online environment contribute to adult faith formation.

I hope that our findings will also contribute to the Church's catechetical mission in the third millennium, as she explores the use of computer-mediated communication to enhance adult faith formation and better understand computer-mediated presence in global learning communities.

Sincerely,

Marianne Evans Mount
Executive Vice President, CDU
Ph.D. Candidate
Department of Human Development
Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University

APPENDIX B
PARTICIPANT AGREEMENT FORM

* Please Note: Attachment D is found at the end of Appendix B

VT IRB – This document is valid from 29 June 2007 – 28 June 2008.

Page 1 of 4

Initials ___Date ___

Consent form

Project Title:

Presence in Distance: What is the lived experience of adult faith formation in an online learning community?

Who is doing this research?

This research project is being conducted by Marianne Evans Mount, a Ph.D. candidate at the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University Program in Adult Learning and Human Resource Development at the Northern Virginia Center in Falls Church, Virginia. Her Faculty Advisor is Professor Marcie Boucouvalas.

Why is this research being done?

The purpose of the research is to explore the lived experience of adult faith formation (as defined in the Catholic Christian tradition) in an online community rather than adult faith formation in a traditional parish or university community. This research project will also explore the meaning of presence in the lived experience of adult learners in an online learning community enrolled in graduate or undergraduate degree studies in theology or in a Catechetical Diploma program.

What will I be asked to do?

As a participant, you will be briefly interviewed by email to obtain background information and establish rapport with the researcher. This should take approximately no more than thirty minutes. (See Appendix C for possible questions that may be asked.) You will also be expected to participate in a text-based online discussion forum with the researcher and other volunteer participants (minimum five, maximum eight participants) for approximately eight weeks beginning in July 2007 and concluding in early September 2007. You are not expected to be in the online discussion forum daily, but you are expected to participate in the discussion forum a minimum of thirty minutes cumulative per week, if possible (Participants may adjust their participation time to accommodate vacations, work related issues, if needed; however, no more than ten days should elapse without participation.) The minimum total discussion commitment is approximately four hours. (Sample questions posed by the researcher are found in Attachment D.)

Initials ___ *Date* ___

All conversations in the forum will be automatically transcribed by the conferencing software (Caucus). The researcher will print and place in three-ring binders copies of the conversations to assist in identifying themes that will emerge from the conversations. The researcher will summarize the conversations, identify emerging themes, and return the summaries to participants periodically for further reflection, linguistic clarification, and deeper insights.

What about confidentiality?

This research project involves creating electronic transcripts of conversations in a password protected, online discussion forum. The transcripts will be printed and bound in binders to explore emerging themes and deeper meanings. I will keep personal information confidential. During the initial interviews, you will be asked to select an alias to protect your identity and confidentiality in published findings. To help protect your confidentiality, all printed transcripts will be kept in a locked file cabinet. To ensure confidentiality, participants will only be identified with an alias in the dissertation and in published findings and oral presentations, unless otherwise directed by a participant. The identities of participants will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of Virginia Tech or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law. All transcripts will be stored and protected in a locked cabinet.

___ I agree to permit my online conversations to be printed out for the purpose of this study.

___ I do not agree to permit my online conversations to be printed out for the purpose of this study.

Initials ___ Date ___

What are the risks of this research?

There are no known risks associated with participation in this research project.

What are the benefits of this research?

It is hoped that the results of the research study will benefit the Catholic Church, as well as other religiously-based educational providers who seek to understand the implications of technologically mediated presence and its applications in the study of theology online.

Do I have to be in this research? May I stop participating at any time?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify. You may also refuse to answer any questions at any time during the interviews.

What if I have questions?

If you have any questions about this research, please contact the researcher at mmount@cdu.edu or call her at 540-338-2700, extension 707. If your questions have not been answered, please contact Professor Marcie Boucouvalas at marcie@vt.edu or call 703-538-8469. If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact: Institutional Review Board, Virginia Tech, by email: irb@vt.edu or call 540-231-4358.

Statement of age of participant and consent

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; the research has been explained to you; your questions have been fully answered; and you freely and voluntarily choose to participate in this research project.

VT IRB – This document is valid from 29 June 2007 – 28 June 2008.

Page 4 of 4

Initials ___Date___

Signature and Date

Name of Participant (Please print):

Signature:

Date:

ATTACHMENT D
(SAMPLE QUESTIONS OF THE RESEARCHER)

Week One:

1. What kind of computer do you use? What is your background using computers and technology in general?
2. What is it like logging into a computer in order to be present to classmates, your professor, and the content of your course?
3. How would you describe your feelings toward your computer? I will post some reflections I wrote about my relationship to my computer.

Week Two:

1. What are your thoughts about asynchronous time—the ability to log on and participate in discussion through printed text that you post at the most convenient time for you—thus using the 24-hour clock to be present in a discussion? Discuss the loss and immediacy of synchronous discussion.
2. What are the advantages/disadvantages of working from home? How does being at home contribute to your online experience? How does your home contribute to who you are and how you are online? What is your experience sitting in a classroom?
3. What is the lived experience of cyberspace as place?

Week Three:

1. How do we make ourselves present in text?
2. What is your relationship to text? Describe how you like to write?
3. How does the technology (edit button) contribute or limit your ability to be present in text?
4. If we like this kind of communication, can we make any assumptions about the kind of people who are drawn to this type of education, like us, or are you here because you had no other option?

Week Four:

1. Describe the facets of your own experience of presence in the online community at CDU, including courses online, cafe, chapel, or wherever you participate in the online campus.
2. What enhances or detracts from presence online for you?
3. Describe the difference of being present online to being present face to face for you.
4. How does our Catholic belief in the Real Presence influence your sense of presence with other classmates in the online learning community at CDU?
5. In your opinion, what is the relationship between presence online and being transformed by your learning experience?
6. What advice would you give to a new Instructor about enhancing presence in the online classroom at CDU?

Week Five:

1. How would you describe the online learning community at CDU as a faith community?
2. How does it compare to the early Christian community described in the Acts of the Apostles?
3. How would you compare this community to other Church communities you belong to?
What are the strengths and weaknesses?
4. Describe the global impact of the online community and what it means for you?

Week Six:

1. If you were describing the online experience of adult faith formation, can you use yourself as an example and describe how it works, how it happens, how it feels for you?
2. In what ways is the online experience a seeking of the face of Christ as the Apostles sought him in first century Palestine?

4. What aspects of the online experience might still need to be converted to be authentic?
5. Can you give me three ground rules, principles, or ideas that you believe are essential for growing spiritually online?

Week Seven:

1. Describe how your faith contributes to a sense of presence (or not) in the online learning community that contemplates the face of Christ?
2. Reflect on the ways that God has been present to you despite the absence of God in physical sensory ways. As St. Thomas says in his prayer, *Adoro Te Devote*--"Sight, touch, taste are all deceived in their judgment of you...On the Cross only the Divinity was hidden, but here the Humanity is also hidden..." Can this make God more present?
3. Reflect and share on the nature of the online learning community as a distinct way to contemplate the face of Christ. In what ways does the theme of presence/absence make the face of Christ visible to you?

Week Eight:

1. To what end would you support someone in your online community? Why or why not would you be willing to help by agreeing to meet face-to-face? Describe the significance of the bond that you feel with others in the online community.
2. How do you think God will use the bonds you have forged in the CDU online community? Is there lasting significance to these bonds?
3. How do we make the face of Christ present and the voice of Christ heard in our online community? How does this nurture the Church's understanding of communion?
4. What would you like to leave our research community with?

APPENDIX C

INTRODUCTORY INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

To Acquaint Investigator with Volunteer Participants
To Probe Backgrounds and Establish Rapport
(Interviews will be conducted via Email)

1. Why did you choose an online program for theological study and adult faith formation?
2. What is your previous experience with online learning?
3. What is your previous experience with technology?
4. What are your expectations about living and studying online as compared to a traditional face-to-face program?
5. How will you make yourself present to the other members of the online learning community?
6. How are you similar or different online than face-to-face?
7. Describe the place where you will study, your typical study schedule, and what kind of a computer you use?
8. How will your family support you?
9. In what ways do you expect the online community to support your faith?
10. Describe your personality. How has it influenced your choice to be online, and how will you use your personality to be present online?
11. How will you contemplate the face of Christ online?
12. How important is the community to your online experience?
13. What are your anxieties about joining an online learning community for adult faith formation and theological study?

APPENDIX D

GRAPHIC IMAGES OF THE ONLINE CAMPUS AND JOHN PAUL II ONLINE RESEARCH CENTER

CDU Quick Links

Student Life
[Reception](#) NEW
[Faith Cohort](#) NEW
[Hope Cohort](#) NEW
[Charity Cohort](#) NEW

[Peace Cohort](#) NEW
[Chapel](#) NEW
[Cafe](#) NEW

Faculty Rooms
[Continuing Ed.](#) NEW
[Graduate](#) NEW
[Undergraduate](#)

CDU Website
[CDU Home](#)
[CDU Contacts](#)

T

Welcome to the CDU Online Campus

Graduate Courses (200 level)		Undergraduate Courses (100 level)
	Student Center (university-level, students, alumni, and faculty)	
Continuing Ed. Courses (300 level)	CDU 25th Anniversary 	Faculty Center

John Paul II Online Research Conference Area

http://cdu-caucus.com/cdur/swebsock/0001479/0788455/William07/main/confhome.cm?5824+8+786+...+x+x+x+x+x

Apple Amazon wtop CoEx u12div4-april6 surveys CoEx-me CDU Campus CDU-me Weather Vanguard St. Theresa Busy, busy, busy... A ... Dog Diseases Contra... Google Busy, busy, busy... A ...

08 Campus BlueRoom - Desig... Home Page John Paul II Online Research Co...

John Paul II Online Research Conference Area

Dr. William Bragg, Organizer

CDU-William => John Paul II Online Research Conference Area

CAUCUS

GO to Search People Favorite Tasks Notes Help Quit

You are Dr. William Bragg. You can manage this site, or customize this conference.

John Paul II Online Research Conference Area

Private & Secure Conference Room - Doctoral Study by Marianne Mount
JP II Online Group CHAPEL

You may create a new item, read all the items or click on item titles listed below to read individual items.

List All the items Now or Every Time

Title (click on column header to sort item list)	New	Last	Last Active	State
Welcome, Overview, and Announcements		1	Jul 20, 2007 16:02	*
Say Hello - Introductions around the room		28	Aug 04, 2007 13:20	*
Research Process		1	Jul 25, 2007 11:09	*
Conversation Topic 1 - Technology		63	Aug 07, 2007 12:13	*
.....Theology online		17	Aug 06, 2007 12:46	*
.....My CDU Self		33	Sep 02, 2007 11:35	*
.....Summary of Week One		9	Aug 01, 2007 17:40	*
-----		0	Jul 12, 2007 17:11	*
Conversation Topic 2 - Asynchronous time and place		59	Aug 07, 2007 14:19	*
.....Summary of Week Two		13	Aug 12, 2007 14:23	*
-----		0	Jul 12, 2007 17:11	*
Conversation Topic 3 - Text and Presence		50	Aug 22, 2007 09:48	*
.....Summary of Week Three		7	Sep 10, 2007 11:09	*
-----		0	Jul 12, 2007 17:16	*
Conversation Topic 4 - Presence		53	Aug 27, 2007 13:02	*
.....Summary of Week Four		6	Sep 07, 2007 10:15	*
.....Creating our Online Persona - Making Presence a Priority		6	Aug 27, 2007 08:16	*
-----		0	Jul 12, 2007 17:19	*
Conversation Topic 5 - Community/Global Reach		61	Sep 02, 2007 12:31	*
.....Reveal or Project?		21	Sep 10, 2007 11:06	*
.....Summary of Week Five		11	Sep 07, 2007 10:24	*
-----		0	Jul 12, 2007 17:21	*
Conversation Topic 6 - Seeking the Face of Christ Online		72	Sep 18, 2007 18:29	*
.....Summary of Week Six		3	Sep 10, 2007 11:07	*
-----		0	Jul 12, 2007 17:22	*
Conversation Topic 7 - Contemplating the Face of Christ Online		34	Sep 21, 2007 04:59	*
.....Summary of Week Seven		61	Oct 07, 2007 20:19	*
Conversation Topic 8 - Online/Offline: How does one support the other?		57	Oct 07, 2007 19:18	*
.....Summary of Week Eight		0	Jul 20, 2007 11:30	*
Continuing Conversation		13	Oct 09, 2007 22:24	*
Post-Research Follow-Up		75	Jan 14, 2008 15:13	*
Technical Help Desk		6	Sep 05, 2007 08:08	*

You may mark all the items as seen or as new. You may manage items individually. You may also resign from this conference.

Done

APPENDIX E

PERMISSIONS

1011 P. 01



Permissions Department
375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014
Telephone 212-366-2684 Fax 212-366-2943

March 7th, 2008

Marianne Mount
Catholic Distance University
120 East Colonial Highway
Hamilton, VA 20158-9012

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Marianne Mount

From: Coleman Barks [maypopbooks@gmail.com]
Sent: Monday, March 17, 2008 6:38 PM
To: Marianne Mount
Subject: Permission

Marianne Mount, you may quote the poem, The Elephant in the Dark in your dissertation. Thanks for your interest. Coleman Barks