

When sin goes viral: A technological analogy

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Adam is . . . scattered throughout the globe. Set in one place, he fell and, as it were, broken small, he has filled the whole world. But the Divine Mercy gathered up the fragments from every side, forged them in the fire of love and welded into one what had been broken. . . . An immense task it was indeed; but think who the Artist was.

— St. Augustine

Famously, the invention of the printing press paved the way for the Reformation, putting the Bible into the hands of individual Christians, not just the learned clergy. It is too early to tell what profound religious effects will flow out of the invention of the Internet. But one development already is emerging: if the reading of books can be and usually is a private, individualized affair, Internet reading connects computer users to one another around the globe.

Of course, we were already connected as one in Adam and as one in being among those Christ would redeem. But with earlier printing and reading technologies such onenesses were less apparent.

Certainly the reading of books is wrapped in a web of dependencies—on those who wrote and those who published the books, not to mention those who taught us literacy. But those connecting webs can fade from sight and mind once we tote our book to an isolated reading space. The worldwide Web is a web of a more obvious and undeniable sort. It connects us directly with those next door and those across oceans.

I was reminded of this connection recently when an especially nasty virus invaded my laptop computer. Everyone who has had these problems—and most people who use computers have—can relate to how aggravated and frustrated I was and may appreciate how the experience put me in mind of sin rather than redemption.

Like the condition of sin, a computer virus affects not just isolated computer users but the entire complex of computing systems. A typewriter is not susceptible to nasty bugs originating in another state or country. But the minute a computer is linked to the Internet it is susceptible to abusive viruses originating at any point in the global web.

Sin has mysterious origins, and so do computer viruses. People we'll never meet or imagine create and set loose destructive bugs that cripple computing systems and eat up untold hours of labor. The viruses have become endemic; just as being human means being a sinner, surfing the Web means being vulnerable to nameless abusers.

And even if we aim to eliminate a particular virus, we must always be on guard against viruses in general. There is no punctual, once-and-for-all treatment or fix for viruses as a whole. We are part of a web that is always susceptible to bugs. As with sin, unceasing vigilance is the only protection against occurrences and recurrences.

With tongue lightly in cheek, I can imagine two more analogies. The advent of wi-fi means that already mysterious viruses may now travel not only invisibly but through the air. Likewise, it was a biblical and early Christian belief that sin and its demonic tempters worked at the behest of "the ruler of the power of the air" (Eph. 2:2). The church father Athanasius said that when Christ was lifted into the air on the cross, he there confronted and defeated demonic forces.

Finally, a tainted computer system can be repaired only by someone who is outside the system but able to enter into it. Computer viruses are stopped and eliminated by programs that are external to the system but are introduced internally. So, too, the redress of sin requires a power external to humanity, yet one able to be incarnated within humanity.

By now I may have stretched this analogy far enough, if not too far. If I have pulled it past the breaking point, I can only plead a kind of temporary insanity induced by the exasperation of a virus that has allowed this piece to be written only in maddening fits and starts. Let those who are without computer viruses cast the first stone.