



Social Networking Protocol for the Catholic Church in Australia

Introduction

The Catholic Church embraces all that is good in new technologies and seeks to engage with people in ever newer and more creative ways as a means of inviting them into deeper relationship with Jesus Christ, within the Christian community.

In addressing the Digital Generation of young people who have grown up in the digital world, Pope Benedict XVI has talked of the “extraordinary potential of the new technologies, if they are used to promote human understanding and solidarity”¹.

“These technologies are truly a gift to humanity and we must endeavour to ensure that the benefits they offer are put at the service of all human individuals and communities, especially those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable,” he said.

Social Networking has emerged as a major phenomenon in which the online building of social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities has fundamentally changed the way in which people, especially young people, communicate and share information.

While noting that social networking sites should not be seen as a substitute for actual community life, but as something that can underpin and enhance the life of actual communities, the Church wishes to take advantage of social networking opportunities as one means of communicating the love of Jesus Christ to people.

In doing so, however, Church entities and Church employees, volunteers and members of official Church organisations or groups, need to be aware of appropriate boundaries and activities when communicating in the name of the Church in an online environment.

Pope Benedict, in his encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Charity in Truth) reminds us that *“technology is never merely technology. It reveals man and his aspirations towards development, it expresses the inner tension that impels him gradually to overcome material limitations. Technology, in this sense, is a response to God’s command to till and to keep the*

¹ Pope Benedict XVI, “Message for the 43rd World Communications Day”, May 2009, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20090124_43rd-world-communications-day_en.html.

*land that he has entrusted to humanity, and it must serve to reinforce the covenant between human beings and the environment, a covenant that should mirror God's creative love."*²

In its desire to engage with technology in pursuing new forms of communication, the Church understands that at all times, such activity must mirror God's creative love, with particular focus on respect for the dignity of the human person.

The following recommendations are designed to give those engaging in online social networking on the Church's behalf a broad set of guidelines for consideration, which might serve as a springboard for more detailed policies to be formed at the local level.

Online or offline, respect for human dignity rules

The overriding principle for clergy, members of religious communities, Church employees, volunteers, or members of Church organisations or groups is that their behaviour online should reflect the standard of appropriate behaviour which is expected in all person-to-person interaction. Such behaviour should at all times demonstrate a Christ-centred respect for the dignity of each person. Appropriate boundaries should always be observed, especially in communication with young people. The child protection protocols and policies of the Catholic Church in Australia and civil authorities must always be observed.

Social networking on the Church's behalf or in the Church's name, should be seen as a tool for evangelisation, inviting people into a deeper personal relationship with Jesus Christ and the people of God, through the promotion of Church activities; the sharing of appropriate catechetical materials, whether in text, video or sound; or the creation of faith-based dialogue on appropriately moderated blogs or forums.

Those who engage in official Church social networking activities must take great care to consistently represent the teachings of the Catholic Church.

Social networking sites should not be used by Church employees, volunteers or members of organisations or groups to be a vehicle for personal communication with those to whom they minister which would fall outside of normal professional or pastoral relationships. A clear distinction should be maintained between personal and professional communication in the social networking environment.

When establishing a social networking presence for a Church entity the following considerations could be helpful:

² Pope Benedict XVI, *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 69, accessed at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/encyclicals/documents/hf_ben-xvi_enc_20090629_caritas-in-veritate_en.html.

On public sites such as Myspace or Facebook,

- Bishops may choose to set up a personal profile on sites such as Facebook. Or in some cases, Bishops have chosen to set up a public profile. A personal profile requires that 'Friend' requests be approved by the owner of the personal profile. This can be an onerous and potentially difficult task requiring the use of judgment³. However, it can also be a way of controlling who appears on the person's page as a 'Friend'. In contrast, public profiles have the facility for people to choose to become a 'Fan' of the holder of the Public profile. Under this arrangement there is no ability for the holder of the profile to approve or ignore 'Fan' requests. All people who become a 'Fan' of the person in question can appear on that person's public profile page. This has the disadvantage of not being able to control who appears as a 'Fan' on your page, but it has the advantage of people understanding that 'Fans' are different to 'Friends' and that no acceptance or rejection of 'Fans' is implied.
- Any other individual working on behalf of the Church or using social networking as part of their professional duties, who wishes, as part of this activity, to set up a personal profile which might involve 'Friending' those to whom they minister, should first seek the permission of the Bishop.
- The private use of social networking sites by clergy, members of religious communities, Church employees, volunteers or members of groups or organisations should be kept distinct from their professional use of such sites. It is advisable that people exercise great care and judgment in accepting 'Friend' requests from people to whom they minister, especially young people. In this way, appropriate boundaries can be maintained.
- Church entities wishing to engage in official Church social networking activities should only set up as Groups (eg Diocese of Broken Bay Youth Ministry) on these sites and not as individuals (eg 'Joe Blogs', Youth Minister for Broken Bay). This removes the possible ambiguities surrounding the issue of whether it is appropriate for Church employees to 'Friend' with the people to whom they minister.
- It is advisable, particularly in the area of Youth Ministry, that in using sites such as Facebook, Church groups should be clearly placed under the "Religious Organisations" grouping and in the descriptor, they should clearly identify that it is the Official Group of the Diocese/Parish/Catholic organisation.
- Those maintaining official Church social networking sites should take particular care with the use of photographs or video. Global permission should be sought from all

³ For example, in The Diocese of Sandhurst, people who wish to 'Friend' Bishop Grech are sent an email asking "How do you know Bishop Joe?", before a decision is taken on whether to accept the 'Friend' request.

individuals in photos or in videos before they are posted. Material which might embarrass or offend those pictured should at all times be avoided. Material should be removed at once if it is the subject of a complaint or if the posting of a particular item makes an individual uncomfortable.

- Moderation of official Church social networking activities is crucial. Respect for human dignity should at all times guide the moderation of such activities. Comments which are rude, disrespectful or even bullying in nature should be immediately removed.
- Appropriate human resources must be allocated to official Church social networking activities. This ensures successful moderation, as well as a vibrant and effective presence in the social networking world.
- Great care should be used to protect people, especially young people, from exposing personal information on publicly available social networking sites. Phone numbers or email addresses should not be available.

Twitter

The use of social networking tools such as Twitter by Church entities is appropriate for the purpose of awareness-raising and evangelisation, particularly if such use links people back to Church websites or activities etc. It is generally not appropriate for individuals acting on behalf of the Church to post their personal thoughts and activities on Twitter. If such activity is, in some cases, considered to be pastorally appropriate, it should first be discussed with the bishop or other religious authority.

Blogs

Blogs are by nature participatory and conversational. Official Church entities who wish to engage in blogging should take special care to allocate appropriate human resources so that the dynamic and interactive nature of the blog is maintained and so that appropriate moderation of comments is maintained, according to the above-mentioned standard of respect for human dignity and for the teachings of the Catholic Church. The boundaries and expectations of the Blog conversation should be clearly stated.

The Church's own social networking sites

As part of the legacy of World Youth Day 2008, the Archdiocese of Sydney operates the faith-based XT3 social networking site. The site is imbued with the Christ-centred ethos and patterns of behaviour outlined above.

Dioceses, parishes, Church groups and organisations are invited to set up a presence on XT3. It hosts a variety of faith-based discussion forums and is also a repository for speeches, homilies, catechetical materials, sound and video.

The above guidelines on appropriate social networking behaviour are, of course, applicable to all social networking sites, including those which are faith-based.

The Digital Divide

Great care must be taken by all Church entities, particularly those engaged in Youth Ministry, not to rely exclusively on social networking as a means of communication. To do this could be to exclude the poor – those who cannot afford a computer, who live in remote localities with poor internet connectivity, who struggle with illiteracy or who face other challenges which place them outside of the online world. Going to Church and hearing others talk about their social networking experiences can be profoundly isolating for those unable to take part. Social networking should only ever be one of a range of communication methods that we use to invite people into closer relationship with Jesus Christ.

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