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A screenshot of Pope Francis' @Pontifex Twitter account on April 21, 2023 with a grey "gover

A screenshot of Pope Francis' @Pontifex Twitter account on April 21, 2023 with a grey "government or multilateral organization account" checkmark. (OSV News screenshot/Twitter)

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On the very day Elon Musk launched SpaceX rocket Starship on its ill-fated maiden voyage toward space, that final frontier, Musk's company Twitter did boldly go purging blue verification check marks from users who had not signed up for its paid Twitter Blue service on April 20, including Pope Francis' Twitter accounts.

The nine papal Twitter accounts, first set up under Benedict XVI in 2012, tweet a daily message from the Holy Father in English, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, Latin, French, Polish, Arabic and German.

"(H)e unverified the pope! we're doing another avignon baby," quipped Twitter user Anthony Oliveira (@meakoopa), comparing the Twitter CEO's actions to the 1378-1417 Great Western Schism, when the Catholic Church had at one time three men alleging to be the true pope -- one in Rome, one in Avignon, France, and the other in

Pisa, Italy. That papal verification issue was settled at the Council of Constance with the election of Pope Martin V.

"When blue smoke emerges from the Vatican that's when we know they verified a new pope," replied Niko Stratis (@nikostratis).

"Counting down the days until mass on Sunday has a second collection for the Pope's Twitter Verification fund," said another Twitter user Jim R. Lynch (@JimRLynch).

The Vatican press office, noting that the nine @Pontifex accounts have a total of more than 53 million followers, told CNS Rome April 21 it understood Twitter was changing some of its policies. But it added, "The Holy See trusts that they will include certification of the authenticity of accounts."

That same day, following the loss of its blue checkmark, each papal account received a new gray verification checkmark designating "a government or multilateral organization account."

The blue checkmark after a Twitter user's name originally served as a way to let people "know that an account of public interest is authentic," per the FAQ section of Twitter's former verification policy. Accounts had to be "authentic, notable and active" and submit specific verification information to fit a specific category of verification.

Twitter introduced the subscription service "Twitter Blue" in 2021, which offered exclusive perks such as bookmark folders and a 30-second undo feature for editing tweets.

Billionaire entrepreneur Elon Musk acquired the company in 2022 and soon after launched an updated version of Twitter Blue that included tweet editing, the ability to upload high-quality video and an identical blue checkmark. In that initial relaunch, many fake yet "verified" accounts abounded and the service was quickly rolled back for tweaks before launching again.

Musk has said that the original way verification was given out was "corrupt and nonsensical" and hinted that non-Twitter Blue marks would soon be removed. On April 11, he announced via Twitter that those legacy checkmarks would finally be removed April 20.

There is now a triad of checkmark colors on Twitter. Blue marks mean an account has an active subscription to Twitter Blue, gold indicates an official business account through Twitter Verified Organizations, and gray indicates a government or multilateral organization. There also are affiliate account badges for each, as well as automated account labels for bots.

To be eligible for a blue mark, accounts must be over 30 days old with a confirmed phone number, have been active in the past month, have a filled-out profile and not be in violation of Twitter's rules on deceptive, spammy or manipulative activity.

Cost for an individual Twitter Blue subscription is $8-$11 a month in the United States; an organization subscription has a base cost of $1,000 a month plus an additional $50 a month per affiliated account.

Other religious entities and organizations that have lost their blue checkmark include the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, National Catholic Reporter, Catholic News Service Rome and Protestant televangelist Joel Osteen.

"We did not know the day nor the hour when our blue check mark would be taken away. But it has indeed been removed," the Reporter (@NCRonline) said in its April 20 tweet.

While not referencing Twitter's new verification system, the now-bluecheckless Osteen tweeted April 20, "Accept the new thing God is doing. God changes seasons. He closes doors to force us into new opportunities, new growth, new relationships. Don't get stuck looking back."

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Some Catholic organizations are skeptical about the paid service's value -- from nonprofits expressing doubt in the value of a monthly subscription and whether Musk could assure them Catholic voices wouldn't be arbitrarily silenced -- to journalistic outfits saying it no longer serves its original purpose.

"Verification is just not indicative of journalistic integrity or expertise anymore," John Grosso, digital editor of National Catholic Reporter, told OSV News. "If anyone can pay for verification, it diminishes the value of the checkmark, or the value that the checkmark had: the ability to tell legitimate news sources and people from non-

legitimate ones."

The $1,000 a month subscription for an organization-level account can also be cost-prohibitive for small nonprofits and businesses.

"For nonprofit media, it's a hard ask when budgets are tight and you're trying to be good stewards of your resources," Grosso said.

Religious leaders and organizations who now have a Twitter Blue checkmark (but not the gold organization-level checkmark) include Archbishop Salvatore Cordileone of San Francisco, Auxiliary Bishop Robert Reed of Boston, Bishop Robert Barron of Winona-Rochester, Minnesota, the Archdiocese of Washington, Christendom College, the Dalai Lama, EWTN News and Catholic Answers.

"Christendom College uses Twitter as method of sharing the good news of our educational apostolate. The benefit my office sees in the blue checkmark is that it lets users on Twitter know that this account is the official account of the college -- so it can be trusted," Niall O'Donnell, Director of Marketing and Communications, told OSV News.

"Another added great benefit of the blue checkmark is the ability to post longer videos," he noted, pointing to one such video from the college's recent chapel dedication.

Reed signed up for Twitter Blue for the convenience it offers such as editing.

"I've had a blue check for many years," he said. "I did not realize that the blue checkmark was associated with it now."