Opinion
Guest Voices



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The challenges the church faces in dealing with social media influencers are not new. In fact, the Gospels suggest they extend back before the roots of Christianity. In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus condemns religious figures who "on the outside look righteous to others, but inside … are full of hypocrisy and lawlessness" (Matthew 23:27-28).

The problem of social media is not merely religious but human, and because it is a human problem, the church, as an "expert in humanity," has ways of understanding and addressing it — even as we acknowledge that the digital age provides a new context for the problem's expression. Some people are pessimistic about our ability to respond effectively. But I am not one of them, because our moral and spiritual tradition leaves us far from powerless in the face of perennial temptations to sin and wrongdoing, no matter the cultural form they take.

In the Gospel texts, Jesus condemns religious leaders for being "hypocrites." But what exactly is a *hypocrite*? According to a leading Greek dictionary, Liddell and Scott, the core meaning of the Greek word is "pretense." The hypocrite is fundamentally an actor, putting on a show for other people. They focus on how they *appear* to other people, not who they actually *are*.

You might ask: "Why is this a problem? Why shouldn't I put on my best face for the digital world? Why shouldn't I strive to be a religious role model? And why shouldn't I play up the good side of things — after all, there is so much disrespect for traditional families and people of faith, why shouldn't I emphasize the positive and attractive aspects of my way of life? Evangelization means 'giving the Good News.' I'm just sharing the Good News of my life — totally due to God's blessings, of course."



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But there are two problems with this response. First, many people may begin their online ministry with exactly these sentiments. But the temptations involved in being a religious influencer can lead them in another, more spiritually dangerous direction. Second, these temptations are not isolated and fleeting but rather are embedded in a significantly distorted vision of what the Good News actually is. To understand these problems, let's turn to the church's understanding of the seven deadly sins.

Significantly, this tradition of spiritual and moral reflection was begun by monks and later expanded by and for the whole church. One might well ask: What do the insights of men who took themselves out of society to dedicate themselves primarily to prayer and contemplation have to say to those of us living today in the digital age? In my view, a great deal.

Not only were they keen observers of the movements of the human soul toward or away from the twofold love of God and neighbor, they also were experts at dealing

with the snares of distraction. Our internet age is an age of distraction, unfortunately enabling us to glide quickly in virtual space over our shortcomings to focus on our perceived triumphs. We need the keen diagnostic eyes of the Desert Fathers and Mothers to identify our wounds and shortcomings before they overwhelm us.

Everyone is susceptible to all the deadly sins, of course, because they target our common human nature. But religious influencers need to be particularly wary of vainglory, greed and wrath. They help explain how quickly a person can devolve from benign concern to put one's best face forward to malign manifestation of religious hypocrisy.

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Superbia, or vainglory, is defined as "inordinate pride in one's achievements." A religious influencer can create her own virtual world, built entirely according to her specifications. That curated and airbrushed world does not correspond to reality, of course. But an influencer can begin to believe her own story, in essence taking pride in a beautiful illusion. That pride feeds *avaritia*, or greed, another deadly sin to which influencers are subjected. If they grow their audiences sufficiently, influencers begin to attract advertising dollars. And money leads to more money. Successful religious influencers can follow a well-trodden path: blog, book deal, Sirius talk show, hefty speaking fees before huge audiences. Money is not the only object of greed. Attention, approval and deference are also goods many influencers seek, particularly religious influencers.

Thirdly, *ira*, or wrath, is a particular problem online. Absolute monarchs in their own Instagram kingdoms, influencers may not respond well to criticism. Coupled with the notorious inability of the comment box to communicate context or nuance, insensitivity can lead to blowups. But there is a side benefit of blowups: They generate more attention, and therefore more money, and therefore more greed. Deadly sins are literally a vicious circle.



(Unsplash/Brett Jordan)

Religious influencers are not the only ones subject to the temptations of the deadly sins — so are their audiences. *Acedia*, sometimes translated as sloth, is a main temptation. It is easy to live vicariously in virtual space, by following along with an influencer's program rather than discerning one's own vocation. Rather than trying to read independently, it is much less work to turn to a favorite influencer's summary and interpretation of a Gospel passage, a magisterial document or an ideological opponent. *Invidia*, or envy, is also a problem, as readers marvel at mothers of many who host scriptures studies with homemade sourdough bread in their beautifully appointed homes while running Fortune 500 companies and marathons on the side.

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Finally, after envy burns through a soul, it can be left with *tristitia*, a despairing lack of gratitude and hopelessness about one's own ordinary life. This despair is counter-incarnational, because a person judges her own full-bodied, three-dimensional life as wanting after comparing it to someone else's virtual life.

If we reflect on the Gospels, we can understand why the temptations of internet influencers are spiritually as well as morally dangerous. Jesus warned us about hypocrisy. The core of hypocrisy is pretense and attention-seeking. We might call it "Look-at-meism," which is not a way to authentic relationship with God or anyone else. But where can we look for a model of authentic relationship?

In my view, it can be found in the story of the Samaritan woman at the well. Striking up a conversation as he asked her for a drink of water, Jesus was not interested in or fooled by pretense — he could see through any first century equivalent of an Instagram filter. When the woman stated that she didn't have a husband, he immediately put that technically true claim in broader context, telling her that she had had five husbands, and the man that she was with now was not her husband.



"Jesus and the Samaritan Woman at the Well," a possibly southwest German, ca. 1420 painting and etching on glass (Metropolitan Museum of Art)

Jesus saw the Samaritan woman for who she actually was and loved her. According to John, it was this moment that made her a disciple:

> Then, leaving her water jar, the woman went back to the town and said to the people, "Come, see a man who told me everything I ever did. Could this be the Messiah?" They came out of the town and made their way toward him. (John 4:28-30).

What can we learn from the Samaritan woman? Origen refers to her as an evangelist. That means she is a reliable bearer of the Good News. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, she is venerated as a saint with the name *Photini*, which means "enlightened [one]" or literally, "luminous [one]."

Photini is enlightened because she recognized that Jesus illuminates her life. She does not make the mistake of thinking she illuminates his life. We can learn from her example about two components of authentic evangelization: First, we need to tell people how Jesus has seen us as we are, warts and all, and looks at us with clear-eyed mercy. Second, we need to assure them that Jesus will look at them in the same way, if only they ask him.

Too many religious influencers, unfortunately, have the evangelization process entirely mixed up. They tell us to look at *them*, implying that their lives illuminate Jesus. And, they wrongly suggest that Jesus will only love the influencer's audience if they imitate the influencer: if they pray the same way, if they vote the same way and if they raise their kids the same way. That is not Good News. It is very bad news indeed.

Jesus himself warns us that hypocrisy — excessive concern with our own appearance — is dangerous. The monastic tradition of scrutinizing deadly sins helps both influencers and their audiences identify just where the dangers lie. And Photini points us toward the solution: Keep your attention on your actual relationship with Jesus, not your virtual relationship with your social media feed.

Editors' note: *This is a slightly modified version of the talk Cathleen Kaveny delivered at the Way Forward Conference at the University of St. Thomas in St. Paul, Minnesota, on Feb. 26, 2026.*

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