

Lent 2.0: No Facebook, no Twitter

Kelly Heyboer Religion News Service | Mar. 4, 2009



Most days you can find college sophomore Adan Farrah on his laptop checking in with his classmates, looking at photos and updating his personal page on Facebook.

For the 19-year-old and many of his friends, the social networking site is something close to an obsession.

"I'm on there a total of three hours a day ... four hours on weekends," said Farrah, a native of Monroe, N.J., and now a student at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania.

But on Ash Wednesday, Farrah decided to quit Facebook cold turkey. No more status updates. No more commenting on photos posted by classmates. No more connecting with high school friends.

In a new twist on an old religious tradition, a growing number of Christian technophiles are swearing off Facebook, MySpace, Twitter and other technology for Lent. Thousands of Facebook users have joined "Giving up Facebook for Lent" groups on the site, replacing the photos on their profiles with boxes announcing they will be gone for the next six weeks.

Religious leaders and scholars across the country are encouraging the faithful to unplug from Facebook, MySpace and other sites in a virtual Lenten fast.

"Oftentimes, we are just spending too much time on these things. We're out of balance," said Fr. John Grimm, an assistant professor of Christian ethics at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. "Giving up something we enjoy and like is to make restitution -- to give penance for our sins."

Lent began last Wednesday, Feb. 25, and ends on Easter. Though traditions vary from church to church, most churches encourage parishioners to either give something up or take something on for the Lenten season, echoing the period Jesus spent in the desert fasting and enduring temptations of Satan.

Yes, going on a Facebook fast counts as a Lenten sacrifice in God's eyes, Grimm said.

Grimm, who recently joined Facebook at the behest of his students, says he does not plan to give it up for Lent. Instead, he is cutting down on the time he spends surfing the Web for entertainment and sports news. The idea is

to replace the time we spend doing something we enjoy with charitable acts, prayer, spiritual reading or something else that brings us closer to God, he said.

Facebook began in 2004 as a social networking site for college students and quickly grew into a nationwide phenomenon with more than 175 million members. The idea of giving up Facebook for Lent was started a few years ago by students at Christian colleges.

Jozef Jankovic, a Facebook user from Michigan, said he heard about the idea and started one of more than a dozen "Facebook for Lent" groups on the site this year that advocate a Facebook fast. More than 80 of his friends and friends of friends became members.

"I like that group because it really warns you about risks of virtual communication," Jankovic said. "Communication can be very helpful -- but on the other hand very seductive and addictive."

Other Facebook users say they considered cutting down on social networking for Lent, but quickly dismissed the idea.

"I'd be crazy to give up this great resource," said Lee Drozak, owner of My Office Assistant, a Web-based office management firm.

Drozak, who works from her Pennsylvania home, said she thought about giving up Facebook for Lent. Then, she realized how much she relies on the site to network and swap ideas with other small business owners.

Instead, she decided to limit her use to one log-on in the morning and another in the evening. But halfway through Ash Wednesday, she had already cheated.

"I slipped at lunchtime. But it's only the first day of Lent!" said Drozak, 43.

Pastor Tim Morral of New Covenant Church in Rochester, N.Y., said many of his parishioners have asked him about giving up technology for Lent. He estimates about a third to a half of his 300-member nondenominational Christian church is on Facebook.

On his blog, Morral advised those who feel they are addicted to social networking to try to quit Facebook for Lent. But he also advised the opposite for "voyeurs," the Facebook users who log on regularly to see what their friends have posted while never updating their own accounts. Those users should commit to opening up and sharing more on Facebook during Lent, he said.

"Facebook is a great tool for building community, but part of being in a community is participating," he said.

As for Morral, he is devoting his Lenten season to cutting down on his Internet use. Instead of monitoring his e-mail inbox all day long and signing on to Facebook three or four times a day, the pastor said he will limit himself to one look a day.

"I think I can do it," Morral said. "Check in with me in 40 days."

(Kelly Heyboer writes for *The Star-Ledger* in Newark, N.J.)

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