

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 1, 2011 at 6:54am

Church takes steps into social media

by Heidi Schlumpf



Archbishop Claudio Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, assists Pope Benedict XVI with the new Vatican news portal on an iPad at the Vatican June 28. (CNS)

When it comes to social networking, some Catholics are slow to click the "like" button. To read recent headlines, you might think the church is sticking to stone tablets: "Facebook and Christianity a bad mix, parish warns" and "Alabama church bans social networking with minors."

But for every St. John Cantius Church, a Chicago parish whose leaders warned of the dangers of Facebook in its bulletin in April, there is an Old St. Patrick's, a Chicago parish that uses Facebook and Twitter to alert more than 2,000 followers to its upcoming summer festival and other events. And though policies against teachers and students "friending" one another are becoming common at both Catholic and public schools, even Pope Benedict XVI has his own YouTube channel to connect with young Catholics.

Hardly known for the speed with which it adopts modern technology, the church is surely, but slowly, joining the masses on social networking sites like Facebook, MySpace and Twitter. There are now more

social network accounts than there are people in the world, and thousands belong to Catholic clergy, sisters, parishes, schools, publications and other organizations.

Used properly, social networking sites can help Catholics communicate and build community, says Lisa Hendey, who gives workshops on Catholic new media and was one of 150 Catholics worldwide invited to a Vatican meeting for bloggers in May.

“So many of our parishes, unfortunately, are places where people show up Sunday morning and then during the rest of the week never really think about their connection to church,” Hendey told 360 people logged in for a webinar on “Digital Ministry and Social Media” on April 26. “Using these tools will really help us to bring a sense of community that can inspire and lead the faithful more toward God and each other the other six days of the week.”

The webinar was hosted by Ave Maria Press in association with the National Conference for Catechetical Leadership and National Association for Lay Ministry.

Merely hosting an up-to-date Web site for a parish or other Catholic organization is no longer enough, Hendey says. With relatively little financial investment and a part-time, tech-savvy volunteer or staff member, parishes could and should be connecting and promoting themselves on Facebook and Twitter, offering online video and podcasting on YouTube or other sites, sharing photos among members using Flickr or a similar site, and sending e-blasts and texts to their members who have smart phones.

If that sounds overwhelming, fear not, says Hendey, who coordinates all of the above not only for her parish (as a nine-hour-a-week employee) but also for her own ministry, CatholicMom.com. The key is to use tools that help streamline and organize your contacts and information. That, and stay focused, so time online doesn’t take away from family and prayer.

“These technologies are tools, not toys,” she said. “You won’t find me playing Farmville on Facebook. When I’m present in these places it’s as a part of my professional responsibilities to my parish and to the ministry I run.”

Rather than just jump on Facebook, parishes should first create a team to develop a plan and goals for their use of social media, Hendey advises. The team should consider how these technologies fit into the parish’s or group’s overall communication and evangelization scheme, she adds.

If some parishioners or parish leadership are reluctant, remind them that even the pope has advocated using social media in ministry in his recent messages for World Communications Day. “This is a gift to geeks like me,” Hendey said. “It’s with this motivation that digital ministers advance forward in using social communication.”

Hendey is full of tips for social media newbies. Among her software recommendations: Blogger or WordPress for blogging or Web sites, HootSuite or TweetDeck for multiple posting, Vimeo or GodTube for video, libsyn.com for podcasting, Ustream for streaming video and flockNote for texting.

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Other advice: Go mobile so you can post from your phone, schedule posts in advance, and set profanity blocking to the strongest settings. And don’t just use social media to post announcements. Build community with photos, videos, prayer requests. Announce events, accept registrations, then follow up

with post-event surveys.

Unlike teens who like to boast about how many folks are following them on Twitter, Heney doesn't worry about numbers. "Build relationships, not numbers," she advised. "Those little seeds will grow. Be more concerned about the quality of communication."

Heney also cautioned about the potential dangers of social media. As the mother of two teenagers and the author of *The Handbook for Catholic Moms*, she worries especially about cyberbullying and other online harassment of young people.

Catholic organizations should respect Facebook's policy of not allowing members under 13, and have dual moderators, not only to share the workload but because two sets of eyes are better than one for moderating, she says. They also should follow any parish, diocesan or the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' social media or "safe-environment" policies.

The bishops' social media guidelines suggest Catholic sites post a "code of conduct," such as the one on its Facebook page that encourages "Christian charity and respect for the truth," and recommends blocking those who refuse to abide by the code.

They also note that church personnel represent the church, whether on "public" or "private" sites. "There's no going rogue when you're online," Heney said. "You're representing the church, so you have to be cognizant not only of your own pastor's wishes but the larger church."

She also believes parish and other official Catholic sites should only contain information in line with church teaching. "For many people who visit your parish Web site or connect with you on Facebook, you may be the only contact they have with the church," she said.

Although a cheerleader for social networking in ministry, Heney recognizes that time online can detract from other relationships and personal prayer time. "We need to pay attention to our real world relationship and our faith life," she said, "not becoming so busy with our use of technology that we neglect those relationships or that most important relationship, with God."

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

On the Web

Heney's Digital Ministry and Social Media webinar is online at vimeo.com/22937944.

The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' social media guidelines are at uscbb.org/comm/social-media-guidelines.shtml.

Source URL (retrieved on 03/21/2018 - 2:54am): <https://www.ncronline.org/news/people/church-takes-steps-social-media>

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