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Facebook at 10: a Christ-haunted political forum, family reunion, prayer group

by Sr. Rose Pacatte

NCR Today

Last week marked the 10th anniversary of Facebook, the social networking site founded more or less (see the 2010 film "The Social Network") by Mark Zuckerberg in his dorm room at Harvard University. OK, Wikipedia says he co-founded Facebook with four other guys, but we really don't remember them, do we? And there were three others who claimed Zuckerberg stole their idea, a legal battle that was settled out of court. In an interview Feb. 4 with Zuckerberg on the "Today" show, there was no mention of anyone but him.

Be that as it may, Facebook has changed the world. Click here to see what some are calling the "staggering" statistics about the social media site. They are impressive indeed. Remember when Marshall McLuhan wrote that the media are "the extensions of man" in his 1964 book *Understanding Media*? How prophetic. It's not only the hard technology at our fingertips; it's the software that has opened up dimensions of being that are the norm for children starting school in the last few years. And Facebook is not only about the extensions of "man" but of women, too. Lots of women.

I first got wired in 1995. In 2004, I launched my first blog that became "Sister Rose at the Movies" when the website for all things religion, Patheos, invited me to migrate there in 2012.

Then I joined Facebook in 2007, and on Feb. 4, I got a video from Mark and the Facebook team. Actually, it's quite nice: [Facebook.com/LookBack](https://www.facebook.com/LookBack).

I love Facebook, and I check it first thing every morning and during the day.

I love it because we have a lot of fun on it as a family through messages. Other family conversations are

sad, especially when someone has been hurt or when someone dies. But what I like most of all is "Baby TV." I check the pages of my nieces and nephews every evening to see if they have posted a video or photo of their kids.

Facebook has brought together many of my friends from my early childhood and youth, and I love this. I have a photo album of these friends because they have posted old pictures. One friend right now is in hospice but so filled with faith and hope that he inspires everyone who reads his posts.

Then there's my community of sisters, the Daughters of St. Paul. I think hundreds of us from around the world are connected. We have many opportunities to share our life, our spirituality, our love for Jesus and his Gospel and the church. Our presence on Facebook lets people know they are not alone, that in this cyber universe, there are people who pray for their intentions.

Flannery O'Connor said in 1960 that while the American South "is hardly Christ centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." When I see the pious postings in capital letters of Catholic Christians "screaming" on Facebook, it is apparent that this social networking site has integrated the geography of the United States and borders have disappeared.

O'Connor also says the Southerner "is very much afraid that he may have been formed in the image and likeness of God." This is true of so many of the 5,000 friends I have on Facebook, men and women (some of whom I actually know), no matter their religion or lack thereof. I think some of their theologically charged political sharings, which range from calm discourse to rants, are engraved on Facebook out of a misinformed fear of God masking as loyalty rather than fidelity -- never mind trust in God's providence, mercy, and a sense of love of neighbor.

Since Pope Francis assumed the chair of Peter last year, there has been a softening of tone -- except from those who cannot stand the idea of gun control and raising the minimum wage. I think Francis' teachings on mercy are giving some people pause as they try to figure out that his Gospel teaching can be integrated into an American milieu that celebrates individualism and consumerism.

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Why are there so many bombastic religious people on Facebook? I think it is because they are Christ-haunted. I also think there are a lot of bullies out there of all ages who are lonely, hurt, and have no one to talk to. To be "afraid" that we are made in the image and likeness of God, as O'Connor describes, means that we don't quite embrace it, because to do so will require change -- and this means political change, as well. Actually, to no longer be afraid that we are made in the image and likeness of God signifies that we have embraced integration of life in Christ. To consider this kind of change can be terrifying.

On Facebook, where it asks for political party, I noted mine as "Principles and themes of Catholic Social Teaching as applied to responsible citizenship." That's a pretty big "party," but many of my Facebook friends reject Catholic social teaching, and some struggle with it. Christ-haunted.

One of the most challenging parts of being on Facebook is when people post pictures of aborted babies. I understand that people are proclaiming their belief in life by doing this, but this is not my way. I prefer to "like" and "share" photos of ultrasounds of friends and family who post them. But O'Connor might have appreciated the grotesque aspect of posting bloody pictures of aborted babies for people who don't "get it." She has words for how to share with people who already believe the same way you do: "The novelist with Christian concerns will find in modern life distortions which are repugnant to him, and his problem

will be to make these appear as distortions to an audience which is used to seeing them as natural; and he may well be forced to take ever more violent means to get his vision across to this hostile audience. When you can assume that your audience holds the same beliefs you do, you can relax a little and use more normal ways of talking to it; when you have to assume that it does not, then you have to make your vision apparent by shock -- to the hard of hearing you shout, and for the almost blind you draw large and startling figures" (*Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*)

But even the most long-winded and angry "friends" can be softened by a photo of Grumpy Cat or a funny animal video showing animals entertaining people or each other. I wish, of course, that as much laughter and generosity about shelter animals could be generated about abused and needy children, but perhaps allowing animals to touch our hearts is a beginning. All my cats live only on Facebook, and I love it. I rejoice that God's animal kingdom brings joy to so many people.

Our sister superior, Sr. Marie, will not open a Facebook account even though her mother, at age 75, is a pro. We have to share photos with Mom or she'd never see them. Sr. Marie says she has no time. You say "tomato," I say "potato." I think Facebook allows each person to contribute something positive to the world, one "like," one "share," one personal story, or one favorite quote at a time.

I have a difficult time accepting friend requests from the Green Scapular or St. Whoever. In the beginning, I accepted everyone as a friend; it was fun to do so. Now I like to know who I am friending.

Over the years, I have made new friends on Facebook, really good friends, and I am grateful. But I don't "chat," I don't allow people to post on my timeline (because so many things were just so political or super pious or weird), and this makes my family unhappy. But not letting them post on my timeline is a saving grace sometimes!

As I conclude my reflection about Facebook, let me say that I think it is the best and strongest prayer group in the world. When I ask for prayers for any intention, I receive so many generous comments even from someone who may disagree with me vehemently on gun control or GMOs. Facebook can bring out the best in humanity, and for this reason, I thank Mark, his Facebook team and all those who contributed to its amazing founding only 10 years ago.

I wish my mother had lived to see the computer become the way our family stays together, especially Facebook and YouTube. I can hear that laugh of hers from her view in heaven, which, I believe, is even better than Facebook.

Here's a small card we give out to students so they can think about their social media behavior and decisions. It's good for grown-ups, too. The "prayer" by Meredith Gould, author of "The Social Media Gospel," is on the back of the card.

Before and after you watch,
play, read, create, post

THINK

T = Is it True?

H = Is it Helpful?

I = Is it Inspiring?

N = Is it Necessary

K = Is it Kind?

Christ has no online presence but yours

Christ has no online presence but yours,

No blog, no Facebook page but yours,

Yours are the tweets through which love touches this world

Yours are the posts through which the Gospel is shared

Yours are the updates through which hope is revealed.

Christ has no online presence but yours,

No blog, no Facebook page but yours.

© Meredith Gould, "Social Media Gospel" based on the prayer of
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