



The Bishops' Conference of Scotland

Guidance on the Safe Use of Social Media

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DEFINITION OF SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media includes all forms of online media and messaging platforms that can be accessed by a wide audience from anywhere. They include, but are not limited to, such sites as Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, LinkedIn, Google+, Issuu, Flickr, Vimeo, YouTube, Tik Tok and Instagram. They also include websites, messaging boards, discussion forums, and blogs. In other words, any form of online media that can be accessed by the public, or where access is online but limited to members or groups, is included in this definition.

“If the Internet represents an extraordinary possibility of access to knowledge, it is also true that it has proven to be one of the areas most exposed to disinformation and to the conscious and targeted distortion of facts and interpersonal relationships, which are often used to discredit. We need to recognize how social networks, on the one hand, help us to better connect, rediscover, and assist one another, but on the other, lend themselves to the manipulation of personal data, aimed at obtaining political or economic advantages, without due respect for the person and his or her rights.”

(Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for *World Communications Day 2019*)

1. INTRODUCTION

“These spaces, when engaged in a wise and balanced way, help to foster forms of dialogue and debate which, if conducted respectfully and with concern for privacy, responsibility and truthfulness, can reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family.”

(Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for *World Communications Day 2013*)

Catholic parishes, religious institutes and organisations are increasingly making use of social media platforms to engage with parishioners and the wider community. In order to ensure the safety of producers and consumers of social media, while at the same time ensuring the integrity of the message we proclaim, the use of technology must be responsible, focussed, and intentional.

It should be borne in mind that social media are global platforms. Online content is visible to anyone in the world who visits a site or page. Administrators of social media platforms must always be aware that they are posting for a broad audience. Also, as a general rule of thumb, whatever is appropriate in public in the physical world is appropriate for the virtual world, while anything that would call for a private conversation in the physical world should occur in person, and not via social media channels.

2. COMMUNICATING A CHRISTIAN MESSAGE

- a) Those who use social media as part of their Church ministry should do so for the purposes of evangelisation and catechesis.
- b) All social communications should be underpinned by Christian charity.
- c) Social media users should recognise that their personal communications can also reflect the Church. It is easy for the line between professional and personal identities to become blurred. What you say, and how you behave, on your own personal social media account can impact on the reputation of the Church.
- d) The inappropriate use of social media to make discriminatory remarks, harassment, threats of violence or other unlawful conduct will not be tolerated, whether such posts are made using official or personal social media accounts.

3. GOOD PRACTICE IN THE USE OF PERSONAL SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

- a) To be safe, check privacy settings on all social media. Think about who can access your information, contact details and whom you are sharing information with. Your profile can usually be made public, private or restricted.
- b) Be honest and transparent - use your own name. Do not post on any social media platform anonymously or using a pseudonym.
- c) Remember that you are in a public space. So, only publish things that you are happy for others to see. Presume that anyone and everyone can see what you post and remember that it will remain online for a long time.
- d) Use prudence and common sense to judge what is appropriate to share, like or comment on.
- e) Be respectful at all times. Do not use discriminatory or abusive language.
- f) Do not use personal accounts or personal devices to post or store photos/videos of children involved in parish activities.

4. ADVICE ON THE USE OF PARISH SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNTS

- a) Approval for new pages or accounts should be sought from the parish priest.
- b) All site or page administrators should be adults.
- c) There should be a minimum of two administrators for each site or page, to allow rapid response and continuous monitoring of the site.
- d) Passwords should be known to more than one person.
- e) You must abide by copyright and fair use regulations when using images or other content (cf BCOS Guidance on Copyright).

- f) Citing others, posting photos/videos of them, or linking to their material must not be done without first seeking permission.
- g) Personal or confidential information must never be shared via social media. This includes the passing on of personal information regarding parishioners when specific permission has not been received to do so.
- h) Unofficial sites carrying the diocesan or parish logo should be reported to the parish priest.
- i) Parish pages and accounts should contain a clear statement as to their purpose and boundaries, e.g. “The purpose of this Facebook page is to inform members of the community about events, programs, prayer opportunities, and faith-formation opportunities at the parish(es) of N, and to update and inform readers about news and the work and mission of the parish(es) of N. Posts and comments which are not made by page administrators do not necessarily reflect the teachings of the Catholic Church.”

5. SOCIAL MEDIA USE AND CHILDREN¹

“Young people are the ones most exposed to the illusion that the social web can completely satisfy them on a relational level. There is the dangerous phenomenon of young people becoming ‘social hermits’ who risk alienating themselves completely from society.”

(Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for World Communications Day 2019)

- a) Those working in youth ministry or any other Church capacity which could involve social networking should seek guidance from their Parish Priest or Parish Safeguarding Coordinator before engaging in this area and they must adhere to the instructions provided in IN GOD’S IMAGE.
- b) Adults in ministry, in general, have no reason to connect with children via social media, and social media should never be the primary means of communication with children. If an extraordinary situation arises which necessitates contact with a child via social media, permission must be sought from their parent or carer. A second adult who has completed the Scottish Catholic Church’s safe recruitment procedure must be copied in and copies of the conversations saved whenever possible.
- c) Permission must be sought from a parent or carer before posting pictures, videos or any other identifying information for a child online. Identifying information includes but is not limited to: name; home address; email address; online tags; and telephone number.

¹ “Children” are defined in our Safeguarding policies as those who are under 18 years of age.

- d) When posting the above after permission has been granted, location settings must be switched off and the name(s) of the child(ren) must not be posted.
- e) Any information provided to children via social media or the internet must also be accessible to their parents or carers. This may involve telling a parent/carer how to access a site, copying parents/carers into all communications, and/or making information available via a variety of platforms.
- f) There is great potential for a blurring of boundaries in the social networking field. It is therefore important that Church personnel should not accept friend requests from children connected to parish ministries. Children should instead be encouraged to 'like' and participate in public discussions.
- g) Private communications create an environment that puts both children and adults at risk. Communication conducted via social media must always be via public channels. This means the use of private Facebook groups and invite-only YouTube channels are not appropriate for parish ministries.
- h) If a child directly contacts someone engaged in ministry through a personal social media account, the ministry account should be used to reply. If it is an emergency situation which requires an urgent response, copies of all messages should be maintained and promptly provided to the parish priest or parish safeguarding co-ordinator.
- i) When children form their own social media groups, adults should not join, even if sent a request to do so.

