



**Diocesan Board of Education  
Diocese of Belleville**

**Regulation 6179**

**Social Media**

Engagement in social media must occur within an overall communication plan. Parishes and school must discuss and determine the various ways through which the communication occurs. This communications plan does not need to be an official written document. It does need to examine the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of communication. It also needs to recognize that a variety of communication methods must be used within parishes and schools. Social media does not replace the parish bulletin any more than the bulletin should replace personal invitation and conversation.

Parishes and schools need to ask the question, “How will we engage?” Careful consideration should be made to determine the particular strengths of each form of social media (blogs, social networks, text messaging, etc.) and the needs of a ministry, parish, or school. The strengths should match the needs. For instance, a blog post may not be the most effective way to remind students of an event. However, a mass text message to all students and their parents telling them that the retreat begins at 9 a.m. may be very effective.

Because of the high volume of content and sites, and the dynamics of search engines and computer networking, social media require constant input and monitoring to make the Church’s presence effective. To keep members, a social networking site, such as a blog, needs to have new content on a regular basis. In the case of social media, the axiom “build it and they will come” is not applicable. It is important to set internal expectations regarding how often posts will be made, so that your followers can become accustomed to your schedule.

**Community**

Social media can be powerful tools for strengthening community, although social media interaction should not be viewed as a substitute for face-to-face gatherings. Social media can support communities in a myriad of ways: connecting people with similar interests, sharing information about in-person events, providing ways for people to engage in dialogue, etc.

A well-considered use of social media has the ultimate goal of encouraging “true friendship” (43rd World Communications Day message [2009]) and of addressing the human longing for meaningful community.

The use of social media should not be restricted to announcements. True community is built on shared understandings and values. Social media can be an effective forum for evangelization and catechesis.

## **Accountability**

Social media provide tools for building community. Membership in communities also requires accountability and responsibility. Users of social media expect site administrators to allow dialogue, to provide information, and to acknowledge mistakes. The explosion of information available to social media consumers has meant that they often only use information from trusted sites or sites recommended by those whom they trust.

While not every demand or inquiry can be met, it is important that creators and site administrators of social media understand how much social media are different from mass media and the expectations of their consumers. Creators and consumers of mass media generally accept their one-way conversations (letters to the editor being the exception). Social media's emphasis is on the word "social," with a general blurring of the distinction between creators of content and consumers of content. Many communication experts are describing the adaptation of social media as a paradigm shift in how humans communicate, a development as important as that of the printing press and the discovery of electronic communication.

## **Guidelines**

When developing guidelines for church personnel to use social media, consider including the following elements:

- **Define appropriate boundaries for communications**

Appropriate boundaries for social media should be in sync with diocesan codes of conduct including but not limited to Diocese of Belleville Board of Education Policies and their accompanying Regulations. Social Network sites must also adhere to the Child Protection policy of the diocese, internet acceptable use policies, etc. Church and or personnel shall define what is considered confidential information, verifiable consent, personal identifiable information, contact with a minor, etc.

Topics that are in current debate will generate more comments/responses. These include issues in which the Church's teachings are often in contrast to some popular positions (gay rights, abortion, immigration reform, health care reform). In other words, the Church's social justice teachings, including the pro-life aspects of those teachings, often elicit unfavorable comments. Some people determine that those topics will not be engaged with on official sites. Others provide guidance on how to engage in dialogue around these topics. (See "Rules of the Road" below for examples.)

- **Include a Codes of Conduct**

This must be posted on any and all social networking sites operated by a parish or school within the Diocese of Belleville. Codes of Conduct are for visitors to the site. These codes should always be brief and immediately apparent to visitors. Visitors should also be made aware of the consequences of violations of the Code of Conduct.

As an example here is the Code of Conduct on the USCCB's Facebook site: "All posts and comments should be marked by Christian charity and respect for the truth. They

should be on topic and presume the good will of other posters. Discussion should take place primarily from a faith perspective. No ads please.”

Always block anyone who does not abide by the Code of Conduct.

- **Provide recommendations on how to deal with difficult “fans.”**

Give church personnel permission to trust their instincts on blocking repeat offenders of a site’s Code of Conduct. Argumentative participants can easily change the tone of every post. A good way to determine if they should be blocked is to go to their profiles and browse through the pages that they have “fanned.” Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage. In particular situations, the moderator might determine it is best to ask a member to take a conversation “offline.” These offline conversations can be conducted in person, over the telephone, or through private e-mail. The site moderators should be able to refer to the appropriate resources, such as the pastor, program director, diocesan communication office, etc.

- **Parishes and Schools using social media should reference the parish website, diocesan website, the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops website, and the Vatican website both as a permanent link and within communication streams. Site Administrators should have thorough and current knowledge of these sites.**
- Social media are global platforms. Online content is visible to anyone in the world who comes to their sites. This offers the possibility to connect with former parishioners who have moved away. It also means that individuals with no knowledge of the parish or its context can view and engage.

### **Establishing a Site**

Websites or social networking profile pages are the centerpiece of any social media activity. The following are recommended guidelines for the establishment of a site. These can apply to a profile or fan page on a social networking site such as Facebook, a blog, a Twitter account, etc.

- Site administrators must be named by the appropriate parish/school personnel and should be adults 21 or older.
- There should be at least two site administrators (preferably more) for each site, to allow rapid response and continuous monitoring of the site.
- Do not use personal sites for diocesan or parish programs. Create separate sites for these.
- Passwords and names of sites should be registered in a central location, and more than one adult should have access to this information.
- Site Administrators must follow these “Rules of the Road”:
  1. Abide by diocesan/parish guidelines. This includes but is not limited to this policy and regulation.

2. Know that even personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church. Practice what you preach.
3. Write in first person. Do not claim to represent the official position of the organization or the teachings of the Church, unless authorized to do so.
4. Identify yourself. Do not use pseudonyms or the name of the parish, program, etc., as your identity, unless authorized to do so.
5. Abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
6. Do not divulge confidential information about others. Nothing posted on the Internet is private.
7. Don't cite others, post photos or videos of them, link to their material, etc., without their approval.
8. Practice Christian charity.

### **Social Networking with Minors**

Be sure to have permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or before posting pictures, video, and other information that may identify that minor.

Parents must have access to everything provided to their children. For example, parents should be made aware of how social media are being used, be told how to access the sites, and be given the opportunity to be copied on all material sent to their children via social networking (including text messages). While parents should be provided with the same material as their children, it does not have to be via the same technology (that is, if children receive a reminder via Twitter, parents can receive it in a printed form or by an e-mail list).

Church personnel should save copies of conversations whenever possible, especially those that concern the personal sharing of a teen or young adult. (This may be especially important with text messaging.)

Everyone must be aware of the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act](#) . . . , which is federal legislation that oversees how websites interact with children under age 13.

### **Personal Sites**

Personal sites of church personnel should also reflect Catholic values. Parish and Catholic School personnel should be encouraged to understand that they are witnessing to the faith through all of their social networking, whether "public" or "private."

Parishes and schools may expect their personnel to include a disclaimer on their personal sites. For example: "The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer." Even with such a disclaimer Diocese of Belleville Board of Education and teacher contracts apply regarding code of conduct and criticism of the Catholic Church, Diocese of Belleville and parishes and schools within the diocese.

## **How to Report and Monitor**

Parish and school personnel should report unofficial sites that carry the diocesan or parish logo to the catechetical leader or principal. If it is an unofficial diocesan site the catechetical leader or principal must report it to the Office of Education. It is important that the owner (the diocese or the parish) is able to protect its brand and identity.

Diocesan, parish and school personnel should inform their immediate supervisors regarding defamatory, libelous, or slanderous comments—not original postings, but comments—on a site, such as a blog.

Parish and school personnel should contact the Chancellor of the diocese if they find misinformation on a site. This is especially important when responding to an incorrect wiki, such as Wikipedia, Masstimes.org, etc.

**Approved:**

**September 20, 2011**

**Office of Education  
Diocese of Belleville**