
Digital Discipleship

In Benedict XVI's statement for the 2009 World Day of Communications, *New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*, he says:

The new digital technologies are, indeed, bringing about fundamental shifts in patterns of communication and human relationships. These changes are particularly evident among those young people who have grown up with the new technologies and are at home in a digital world that often seems quite foreign to those of us who, as adults, have had to learn to understand and appreciate the opportunities it has to offer for communications...

With this in mind, many adult youth leaders are using contemporary technology to communicate efficiently and spread the Gospel message. Catechists, youth ministers, high school campus ministers, teachers in Catholic schools, etc. have been called to meet young people where they are at in order to appropriately and adequately inculturate the Gospel message.

As leaders in Church, it is important to be aware that one represents the Church and her teachings at all times, even when not directly involved in Church activities. To that end, the Division of Catholic Education offers the following guidelines for adults who work with young people so that our messages can remain appropriate and valid for the handing on of the faith.

I. *Guidelines for TEXTING, EMAILING, BLOGGING, TWITTER, CHAT, etc.*

1. All communication should be considered permanent and public; think twice before hitting the *Send* button to be sure a response will not be consider impulsive later.
2. Remember: boundaries must be respected in written communication as well as in oral communication. Keep in mind the relationship – adults are not personal friends with young people.
3. Write as though you are certain that others will read what you write; ask yourself how your supervisor or a parent would react to your message.
4. Be aware that emotions can be mis-interpreted in your message. Think about whether someone could 'read something into it'.
5. Keep the message clear, leaving no room for misinterpretation, especially avoiding comments that may also have sexual overtones.
6. Be sure that those you plan to text have a 'texting plan' so as to not create unplanned expenses for them or their families.
7. Keep in mind the time of day; do not text at times you would not find suitable to call someone.
8. Whenever possible, use the parish/school email vs. personal email account to communicate with youth.

9. Save all e-mail communications with children/young people.
10. To protect others' privacy, hide email addresses when using a distribution list.
11. Maintain paper/hard copies of all communication from youth that seem inappropriate; give a copy to your supervisor if appropriate.
12. Not all communication from young people requires a response.
13. All pictures sent over the phone or email must be appropriate, thus reflecting the role you play in the Catholic Church.

II. *Guidelines for Adult Church Leaders use of Web 2.0 Tools such as Social Networking Sites, YouTube, Flickr, WiKi Spaces, etc.*

1. Always remember that you represent the Church to anyone who may read your page; therefore content/applications should be appropriate for a child to read it.
2. Use of all photos/videos of minors must have the parents' written permission for use in internet applications, including the parish websites and individual social network sites.
3. Be reluctant to provide personally identifying information, especially the names of minors.
4. Keep in mind that all postings are public and permanent.
5. Ask yourself how you would feel if the young people you work with saw a given entry, even if you do not use it to communicate with youth.
6. Those who have a 'personal' site on social networks such as Facebook or MySpace should neither advertise that site nor send friend requests to minors to their personal site. In addition, they should be cautious about accepting Friend requests from minors.
7. With the proper parish/school approval, the ministry may create a professional networking page (eg. Fan page) for the sharing of information; this page must be consistently monitored and should not be the personal site of any of the adults affiliated with the ministry.
8. On any blog/social network site, personal opinions and discussions are often conducted. It is essential to remember, however, even through the Internet, others will recognize them as representing the values of the Catholic Church. Remember that posts can have a negative effect on parish, Diocese of Buffalo, the youth, your family, etc.
9. Understand the social networking site enough to be able to properly tag photos, set privacy settings, and protect your identity and that of the young people with whom you work.

III. *Things We Can do:*

1. Social networking sites, when used appropriately can be a vehicle through which to evangelize and connect with youth and young adults.
2. Text/post prayers, Scripture readings, and notes of gratitude and affirmation for jobs well done.
3. Collect prayer requests, text birthday wishes or well wishes for upcoming exams, etc.
4. Use the technology to advance the message of the Gospel.
5. Create a post-Confirmation Blog.
6. Showcase past and upcoming events.

This document was prepared in consultation with several parish catechetical leaders, youth ministers, and clergy and in collaboration with the following diocesan departments:

Lifelong Faith Formation

Catholic Schools

Youth & Young Adult Ministry

Safe Environment

This remains a working document. All comments and ideas can be directed to the Department of Lifelong Faith Formation.

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