

Evangelization in 21st century: Arkansas bishop joins Facebook

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. – The days of Facebook only being for college and high school students are long gone. Little Rock Bishop Anthony B. Taylor is believed to be the first U.S. Catholic bishop to join the popular Web site.

As of Dec. 10, he had 815 friends worldwide and counting.

Started in 2004, Facebook rivals MySpace as one of the largest social networking sites on the Internet. It is the fourth most-trafficked site in the world, according to comScore, an Internet research company.

Facebook reports more than 120 million registered users. Of these, the fastest-growing segment is people 25 and older. The site is free to users, but small advertisements are interspersed with the content. Only Facebook members can view the site.

Members can join networks based on cities, workplaces and campuses to find friends and co-workers in the system. Every member has a profile page where he or she can add work and personal information, as well as install applications that perform a wide range of functions. Members can view their friends' profile pages, send private messages, share photos and interact in a variety of ways. Based on their interests, members also can join groups and fan clubs.

Shortly after being ordained as Little Rock's bishop in June, Bishop Taylor said he was told a fan club had been created about him on Facebook. When he went online to look at the page, he realized he had to sign up to see it, so he did.

Not long after posting his information and a photo, the word spread fast and before long he had more friend requests and group invitations than he could keep up with.

"I want to be available and accessible to everybody in the diocese," said Bishop Taylor said of his membership on Facebook. "This is a way to be present to the younger people of the diocese."

Stephen Elser, 17, a senior at Catholic High School in Little Rock, attended Bishop Taylor's ordination. Afterward he was so enthusiastic about the diocese finally having a bishop after a two-year period without one, Elser went onto Facebook and found the "Bishop Taylor Fan Club." Its administrators had abandoned the page so he took it over and invited all his friends to join.

Elser said his goal was to get Bishop Taylor to join Facebook, which he did shortly thereafter.

"It actually kind of surprised me, I mean I hoped he'd get one, but it was just surprising," Elser told the Arkansas Catholic, the diocesan newspaper. "I thank God he did because I like how he posts his homilies."

Though unable to respond to the many messages he receives, Bishop Taylor does accept all friend requests. Beyond youths in the diocese, he is friends with people of all ages worldwide who are laypeople, clergy and religious.

The bishop also gets numerous invitations on Facebook to attend high school youth and campus ministry events from around the state.

"I'm not able to go to hardly any of them, but I become aware of what's going on," he said.

"I want to be part of their lives," Bishop Taylor said. "Technology like anything has good points and weak points. But it can certainly be used to spread the Gospel and to build up the community."

Many parish and diocesan leaders seem to agree. Several of Arkansas' priests, religious, youth and campus ministry and religious education workers are also on Facebook for the same reason – to evangelize.

"It's a tremendous tool of evangelization," said Father John Antony, pastor of St. Raphael Church in Springdale. "Like St. Paul used to write letters to the churches, we use notes on Facebook to reach people with the Gospel."

He also posts homilies on Facebook and considers doing that a young adult ministry.

Catholic youths and youth ministers all over the country are no doubt using Facebook to make connections, share news about events or stay in touch.

In the Diocese of Toledo, Ohio, Deacon Jerry Ziemkiewicz, diocesan coordinator of youth ministry, has been using Facebook for a year and a half.

"It's been a good tool for continuing to do our youth ministry beyond our youth group gatherings, beyond our church," the deacon told the Catholic Chronicle, the diocesan newspaper.

High school senior Shannon Spayde, who serves on the diocesan youth council, said Facebook gives teen representatives from parishes around the diocese another way to get to know one another between meetings and helps former council members stay in touch.

She is happy to see youth ministers joining the networking site.

"I thought it was really awesome that they wanted to participate in our lives and be a part of a thing that we were part of, so we could connect on another level," Shannon said.