

# Is Facebook targeting Catholic clergy?

**By Christopher Gunty**

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Father T. Austin Murphy Jr. was surprised to get a message on Facebook from Facebook, asking him to verify his settings. The social media site asked him to submit evidence that his name is correct, that it was the one he uses in everyday life.

Facebook's policy does not allow professional or religious titles in the basic name fields for personal pages (public pages for people with large followings have a different policy). More than a billion people around the world use the service, and having just a name without a title makes it easier to search, said a Facebook spokesman, who ironically preferred not to be named and spoke with the Catholic Review only "on background."

Father Murphy, pastor of Our Lady of Hope in Dundalk and St. Luke in Edgemere, blogs about faith and culture at "Jesus Goes to Disney World." He's also a board member of Catholic Review Media, parent company of this publication. The priest has been a member of Facebook for several years and has used "Fr. Austin Murphy" as his handle. To the Facebook spokesman's point about searchability, type "Austin" or "Fr. Austin" into the search box, and you can find his page.

"That's how I wanted people to find me. That's who I am," he said. So when Facebook recently asked him to verify his identity, via a government document such as a driver's license or passport, he couldn't do that. "A government ID would never have 'Father' on it," he acknowledged.

But Father Murphy said he and many of his priest friends have recently been asked for such verification. "It's an annoyance. Everyone on Facebook should have to do that. If not, what's the point of having a policy?"

Facebook's spokesman says he cannot comment on individual user's cases. As with

all of its policies, Facebook relies on its community to let them know about violations. He claims they don't go looking for accounts in violation. But from recent anecdotal evidence, it seems Catholic priests and deacons are being targeted.

Facebook provides an option for people who want their title to be part of their online identity. On the about page, under details, anyone can add a nickname, a maiden name or a professional title, and that name can appear in parentheses on the user's cover page.

That's a nice accommodation, but Facebook went a step further with a particular subset of users: transgendered people and drag queens who want their Facebook identity to be the name by which they prefer to be known, rather than their legal name. The spokesman said Facebook had been in conversations with that community, which has a unique set of challenges. In October 2014, the Guardian online reported that Facebook's chief product officer, Chris Cox, apologized "to the affected community of drag queens, drag kings, transgender, and extensive community of our friends, neighbors, and members of the LGBT community for the hardship that we've put you through in dealing with your Facebook accounts over the past few weeks."

Facebook's spokesman told the Catholic Review Aug. 31 that this community is unique in that if a person was born, for example, male, but now identifies as female, it's a shift in identity.

The same could be said for a Catholic priest or deacon. Ordination changes the person's identity and sets them apart. It doesn't make them holier, but the Catechism of the Catholic Church says, "Through the ordained ministry, especially that of bishops and priests, the presence of Christ as head of the Church is made visible in the midst of the community of believers" (CCC 1549).

Father Murphy said using the name "Fr. Austin Murphy" was never an issue when he started using the site. And he acknowledged that Facebook is voluntary; he's not forced to use it. But that's where conversations are happening and he wants to be present in that community. "I'm deciding if I want to keep doing that."

"They say they want you to go by the name you go by in real life," he said of being

challenged for using “Fr.” in his user profile. “Well, there it is.”

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