

# USCCB issues guidelines for use of social media

WASHINGTON - The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has issued a set of guidelines for using social media, especially as social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter continue to gain in popularity.

"Social media are the fastest growing form of communication in the United States, especially among youth and young adults," the guidelines say. "Our church cannot ignore it, but at the same time we must engage social media in a manner that is safe, responsible and civil."

"My hope is that they'll be a useful resource to people, especially to dioceses and parishes that are interested in using social media," said Helen Osman, USCCB secretary for communications, in a July 19 interview with Catholic News Service.

The guidelines, which Osman said were posted on the USCCB's website in early July, can be accessed by going to [www.usccb.org/comm/social-media-guidelines.shtml](http://www.usccb.org/comm/social-media-guidelines.shtml).

"The church can use social media to encourage respect, dialogue, and honest relationships - in other words, 'true friendship,' " said the guidelines, quoting from Pope Benedict XVI's 2010 World Communications Day message. "To do so requires us to approach social media as powerful means of evangelization and to consider the church's role in providing a Christian perspective on digital literacy."

The guidelines point to visibility, community and accountability as three principal areas where the church can make a positive mark in social media.

"The key question that faces each church organization that decides to engage social media is, How will we engage?" the guidelines said. "Careful consideration should be made to determine the particular strengths of each form of social media," which include blogs, text messages and social networks, and the needs of a ministry, parish, or organization.

"The strengths should match the needs," they added.

“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,” the guidelines said.

Social media can be powerful tools for strengthening community, according to the guidelines, “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,” including connecting people with similar interests, sharing information about in-person events and providing ways for people to engage in dialogue.

“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,” the guidelines said. “Social media’s emphasis is on the word ‘social,’ with a general blurring of the distinction between creators of content and consumers of content.”

The USCCB’s own Facebook site lays out ground rules: “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.” The guidelines recommend “always” blocking usage by anyone who does not abide by an established code of conduct. “Do not allow those unwilling to dialogue to hold your site and its other members hostage,” it said.

“You would think as Catholics you wouldn’t have to remind us to play nice, but it was in every set of guidelines I looked at,” Osman told CNS.

It may seem counterintuitive, but Osman said she has “gotten one request for a printed version” of the guidelines. She said, though, that it “needs to be a living, breathing document on the Web. There may need to be changes on a regular basis.”

One potential change: The guidelines said there are “400 million active users” on Facebook. But Facebook’s founders were set to announce before the end of July that the social networking site had reached the 500 million mark.