

# PASTORAL GUIDELINES FOR THE USE OF SOCIAL NETWORKING AND TECHNOLOGY



DIOCESE of LA CROSSE  
[diolc.org/safe-environment](http://diolc.org/safe-environment)

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## **About this Document**

The Diocese of La Crosse, its Parishes, and its Schools (hereinafter “Diocese/Parish/School”) provide employees with the opportunity to access its Internet Systems for Diocesan/Parish/School purposes. These pastoral guidelines provide direction to employees and volunteers of the Diocese/Parish/School on the use of electronic devices (i.e. computers, phones, tablets, gaming systems, etc.) and social media.

These guidelines are consistent with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, the Diocese of La Crosse Safe Environment Program, the Diocese of La Crosse Computer Policy, and the Diocese of La Crosse Sexual Misconduct procedures, also known as “the Red Book.”.

Parts of these guidelines are adapted from documents of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Diocese of Rockford, the Archdiocese of Milwaukee, and the Archdiocese of Dallas. We are grateful for their permission to use their documents.

The Internet is a gift of God, but it is also a great responsibility. Communication technology, its places, its instruments have brought with it a lengthening of horizons, a widening, for so many people. It can offer immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. May the digital network not be a place of alienation. May it be a concrete place, a place rich in humanity. Let us pray together that social networks may work towards that inclusiveness which respects others for their differences.

Pope Francis - June 2018

## Section One – Introduction

The guidelines for the Pastoral Use of Technology and Social Media are designed to aid all Diocese/Parish/School employees and volunteers in situations in understanding appropriate usage, boundaries and best practices in using technology and social media.

*Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today's media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise. (Laudato Si: On Care For our Common Home, Pope Francis).*

Technology provides us with multiple opportunities to instantly communicate with one another. Our current capabilities to electronically communicate include messaging such as blogs, text messaging and email, social networking, websites, and online gaming. These capabilities are ever increasing and ever changing. The benefit to us when making use of these capabilities is the ability to communicate to larger audiences, as well as to specific target audiences. However, one concern in using these capabilities is that they provide more opportunities to communicate anonymously and secretly.

While the key to ministry is meeting people where they are, we must first clearly define and understand where it is we are meeting them, and most importantly, set our own guidelines for going to those places. These guidelines are set up to help maintain a safe environment for all God's people.

Technology and the use of social media gives the Church a way to reach out to the faithful, as well as the unchurched, to make connections that ultimately become authentic relationships bound by the authentic love of Jesus Christ. We must realize that ways of communicating are ever changing, therefore our vigilance for protecting all of God's people is required.

Using the media correctly and competently can lead to a genuine enculturation of the Gospel. (*The Church in America [Ecclesia in America]*, no. 72, Pope John Paul II)

## Section Two – Basic Terms

**Blogging -** A blog (a contraction of the term “web log”) is a type of website, usually maintained by an individual, with regular entries of commentary, descriptions of events, or other material such as graphics or video. Entries are commonly displayed in reverse-chronological order. “Blog” can also be used as a verb, meaning to maintain or add content to a blog.

**Mandated Reporter:** Any school employee, child care provider, or other individual identified in Section 48.891(2)(a), Wis. Stats., who has reasonable cause to suspect that a child seen by the person in the course of professional duties has been abused or neglected or has been threatened with abuse or neglect and that abuse or neglect of the child will occur.

Additionally, any member of the clergy who has reasonable cause to suspect that a child seen in the course of his professional duties has been abused or neglected or has been threatened with abuse or neglect and that abuse or neglect of the child will occur, or if the member of the clergy has reasonable cause, based on observations made or information that he receives, to suspect that a member of the clergy has abused a child or threatened a child with abuse and that the abuse will likely occur.

**Ministry/Group:** Any parish, school, or diocesan institution and its employees/volunteers which administers/sponsors an online presence.

*Examples:* A parish Facebook page; a high school football web page; a youth ministry blog; a parish website; an event-based activity sponsored by/with the Diocese of La Crosse which is published in some manner on the internet.

**Minors:** Any person below the age of 18years. Also, any person who habitually lacks the use of reason is to be considered equivalent to a minor.

**Social Media:** Any website or application that enables people to create and share content or to participate in social networking.

**Social Networking:** The use of a website or application dedicated to building or forwarding interactions with other users.

**Technology:** Any electronic communication device (i.e. computers, phones, tablets, gaming systems, etc.) that can connect peer-to-peer or connect to the public Internet

## Section Three – Guiding Principles

### A. Boundaries

1. **Minors and vulnerable adults are not the peers of an adult serving within a leadership capacity.** Church personnel should be ever vigilant regarding healthy boundaries with everyone, especially with minors and vulnerable adults.
2. **Church Personnel are duty-bound to set the boundary.** It is inappropriate for personnel to include minors and vulnerable adults within their own social circle, on-line or otherwise. Church personnel should not be accessible on a constant or on-call or social basis to the minors and vulnerable adults they serve.
3. **Be responsible** – Members of individual diocesan churches and/or other entities are personally responsible for their posted content, and will be held personally accountable for such.
4. **Official statements of parish or diocesan policies may only be made by the Pastor/Administrator.**
5. **Be selective** – Use the right medium for your message, a blog or social network might not be the right context for messages intended only for a small group.
6. **Identify Yourself** – Use real identities for all activities rather than anonymous or fictitious-names and identities. Authenticity and transparency are driving forces behind social media.
7. **Respect the privacy of others** – Do not publish the personal information of others in the community without their permission or, in the case of minors and vulnerable adults, without the permission of their parents/guardians.
8. **Be respectful** – Respect your audience, express your views with appropriate language, civility, and be respectful of the Church and her teachings. Your communications must not offend the teachings of the Catholic Church.
9. **Confidentiality** – Respect the confidentiality of matters that are shared with you in confidence, or that are meant to be kept confidential by the nature of your work, ministry or volunteer mission. However, confidentiality cannot apply in situations that require you to report under the mandated reporter law.

### B. Primacy of Parents/Guardians

Parents/Guardians are the primary educators of their children in faith and the first heralds of the faith. Be aware that many young people utilize technology, socially or otherwise, with and without permission of their parents/guardians. Church personnel are to receive written permission from the parents/guardians of each minor and vulnerable adult with whom church personnel wish to communicate through social media and technology and shall respect their

authority. Parents/Guardians shall also be invited to have access to the social media site and/or electronic communication. Church personnel may provide parents/guardians with information regarding safe use of technology and social media for their children.

**C. Discretion**

We must take great care to respect the dignity of each person to whom we minister whether it be face-to-face or on-line. Clear communication and respect for boundaries is required at any level of contact, especially with minors and vulnerable adults. Emails, text messages, blog postings or comments, and videos are all public forums of which a permanent record can be obtained. As a representative of the Church (paid or volunteer), those who work with the Church faithful are to be diligent in avoiding situations which might be a source of scandal for themselves, others, or the Church.

**D. Ownership**

Any technological tools that we use as part of our work or volunteering in the Diocese/Parish/School, such as websites, blogs, social network sites, and the like, are the property of the Diocese/Parish/School.

**1. Use of Official Name and Logo.** Any use of the logo of the Diocese of La Crosse and its entities for branding or titling pages, blogs, or other similar elements of social media must be approved in writing by the Diocese of La Crosse prior to use. Requests for consent to use such names or logos are to be made to the Moderator of the Curia (in the case of the Diocese, its institutions or entities, and its administration) the pastor (in the case of the parish and its ministries or administration) and the Principal (in the case of the school). Any uses in existence at the time of adoption of these guidelines are not grandfathered and should be authorized. Permission to use the name or logo of the Diocese/Parish/School may be revoked at any time in the sole discretion of the Diocese/Parish/School.

**2. Interpretation.** In areas where these guidelines do not provide a direct answer for how members of our Church faithful should conduct themselves, church personnel should contact their supervisor. Questions on interpretation of this policy may be sent to the Moderator of the Curia for the Diocese of La Crosse.

**3. Duties of Moderators.** Each parish, school, Diocesan institution or entity that has a social media vehicle must have a minimum of two adult moderators. Moderators of parish, school, institution or entity social media are responsible for ensuring compliance with these guidelines and all Diocesan policies and codes of conduct. All comment and blog response areas must be moderated. Those responsible for such areas must review and approve comments prior to posting, and should not post any comment which is not civil, misrepresents the position of the Church, offends the faith or morals of the Church, or includes inappropriate language or speech. Anonymous comments are not permitted. All moderator functions should reserve the right to ban offenders. Moderators who permit users to post materials such as documents, photographs or video should make clear to users that the site

will not archive those materials and should delete them after a published period of time (typically 3 months).

**4. Individual Judgment.** Even when engaging in social media for personal use, the comments of employees of the Diocese/Parish/School may be viewed as a reflection on his or her community and the Catholic Church universal. Employees of the Diocese/Parish/School shall use prudent and reasonable judgment when engaging in social media activities and shall be on guard against actions and discussions that could harm the interests of themselves, the community, or the Church.

**5. Copyright Laws.** Employees of the Diocese/Parish/School shall comply fully with copyright law when using social media and technology

**6. Privacy.** Employees of the Diocese/Parish/School are to safeguard the privacy interests of others. In particular, personally identifiable information (that is, name, phone number, address or email address), shall not be disclosed without the prior consent of the person identified, or parent or guardian of a minor. In cases where an individual has consented to the publication of such information, appropriate privacy settings shall be utilized. Church personnel using social media are required to abide by the confidentiality policies of the Diocese of La Crosse.

**7. Additional Guidelines.** Pastors and administrators of Diocese/Parish/School may implement more restrictive rules for the use of social media and technology if they deem it appropriate.

**8. Abuses.** Any use of electronic communication or social media that violates these guidelines or any other diocesan policy shall be brought to the attention of the Pastor/administrator or the Moderator of the Curia for the Diocese of La Crosse immediately. The person violating these guidelines may be subject to disciplinary action including termination.

**9. Questions and Updates.** Questions concerning interpretation of this document should be directed to the Moderator of the Curia for the Diocese of La Crosse. This document may be updated and modified at any time. This document and any future modifications will be made available at [www.diolc.org](http://www.diolc.org) where it will be available in its entirety.



## **Section Four – Web Pages/Social Networking/Blogging**

Technology has revolutionized the way people communicate and share information with one another. It has given us the ability to communicate through web pages, social media, and blogging. These are all ways that the ministry has the potential to reach beyond our communities, but to the whole world. Therefore, when establishing these means of communication, we must commit to keep them updated, relevant, and most importantly, safe.

### **Web Pages**

Websites are a great way to communicate with people 24 hours a day. People can go to our website and engage with our Diocese/Parish/School, or organization at any time of day. Our websites can provide both, information and spiritual nourishment for those with whom we minister. There should be an intentional plan and set of goals regarding establishing, maintaining and monitoring a web presence. This plan should be clearly communicated to the staff, employees and volunteers of the Diocese/Parish/School.

1. Web sites must be representative of the values of our Catholic faith and reflect the teachings of the Catholic Church.
2. Administration of the site must be accomplished by at least two adult diocesan/parish/school staff who each have full access to the site.
3. A professional image shall be projected to all visitors.
4. Administrator must abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
5. Do not divulge confidential information about others, because nothing posted on the Internet is private.
6. Obtain the written consent of any person, or the parent or guardian of a minor, before using their name, image, or picture for any advertising or commercial purposes.

### **Social Networking/ Blogging**

A social network service utilizes software to build online social networks for communities of people who share interests and activities. Most services are primarily web-based and provide various ways for users to interact, such as chat, messaging, email, video or voice chat, file sharing, blogging, and discussion groups. A social network is a Web 2.0 site that is entirely driven by content of its members. Individuals are allowed flexibility in privacy settings and in levels of interaction with other members. Examples include, but are not limited to, Facebook, SnapChat, LinkedIn, Instagram, Twitter, YouTube, and Flickr. **All involved should know that what is posted is not private.**

1. Social networking sites must be representative of the values of our Catholic faith and reflect the teachings of the Catholic Church.
2. The main purpose of the site should be for general communication, not chatting or socializing.
3. A clear statement of intended purpose and outcome of the social networking site should be posted and clearly seen.
4. All appropriate individuals at the Diocese/Parish/School, (pastors, principals, and staff) must be aware of and have given approval for using a social networking site for diocese, parish, and/or school programs.

5. Any Diocese/Parish/School/ministry site must be completely separate from personal network.
6. Adults shall not request a minor, nor accept a request from a minor to be personal “friends” on a social networking site.
7. The site shall maintain transparency in all communications and postings by being clear in stating who, what, when where, how, and why.
8. The site must be administered by at least two (more is preferred) adult Diocesan/Parish/School staff who each have full access to the site.
9. Passwords and names of sites shall be registered in a central location, and all adult administrators of the site shall have access to this information.
10. The administrators of the site must regularly monitor and approve all comments and postings. Any inappropriate content shall be deleted immediately and it should be made known to the individual who posted it that inappropriate content is not tolerated.
11. No adult shall ever engage in private messaging with a minor through a social network site.
12. Professional conduct shall be used, not only to minors, but also the general public.
13. Keep in mind that humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted and a statement or joke may seem harmless, but may be offensive to someone else.
14. If any information raises suspicion that a minor has been abused, neglected, or exploited mandatory reporters are obligated to report to local law enforcement officials or child protective service agencies. The information must be communicated to the proper authorities in a timely fashion, and then follow the directions of the authorities.
15. Post examples of Codes of Conduct on social networking sites. 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. The Code of Conduct on the USCCB’s Facebook site is as follows: “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.
16. Abide by copyright, fair use, and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
17. Do not divulge confidential information about others.
18. Obtain the written consent of any person, or the parent or guardian of a minor, before using their name, image, or picture for any advertising or commercial purposes.

## **Best Practices When Using Web Pages/Social Networking/Blogs**

The decision of whether to have a web presence is that of the Administrator/Pastor of the Diocese/Parish/School.

1. The ownership of the web page or other social media presence belongs to the Diocese/Parish/School, and not to the ministry or group. The Pastor/Administrator has the sole discretion to start, modify or close the web presence.
2. Write in first person. Do not claim to represent the official position of the Diocese/Parish/School or the teachings of the Church, unless authorized to do so.
3. Abide by copyright, fair use and IRS financial disclosure regulations.
4. Practice Christian charity.
5. Do not post or otherwise use a picture or video that might be considered embarrassing or unflattering. If an individual is uncomfortable with a particular photo or video, it should be immediately removed from the website. All material should have approval of the subject.
6. Set private messaging capabilities to “offline” or “unavailable.”
7. Parents must have access to everything provided to their children/vulnerable adults.
8. If employees and volunteers of the Diocese/Parishes/Schools want to use a blog for work purposes they must create a professional blog that is separate from their personal blog. This account should be seen as an official extension of the institution’s web presence and administered by an adult.
9. Employees and volunteers of the Diocese/Parish/School, with permission from the Pastor/administrator may create a blog on which both youth and adult employees/volunteers can interact without full access to one another’s profiles.
10. Personnel’s mandated reporter obligation extends to all circumstances involving blogging, social networking and technology.

## **Section Five – Email, Text Messaging and Video Chatting**

While email is still a primary means of communication for many people, text messaging has become a primary method of communication. Most cell phones and tablets are capable of sending and receiving text messages, emails, and chatting via video. While this can be convenient, it can also make users more vulnerable. Video Chatting can be done through applications such as Skype and FaceTime. While face-to-face conversations are encouraged in ministry, video chatting is prohibited between an adult and minor/vulnerable adult.

The same boundary issues that must be respected in oral communication must be respected in written ones. Good judgment should always be used with text- based communication tools.

Remember that there is no such thing as a private e-mail or text message. All e-mail and text messages can be logged, archived, or forwarded to other parties. Personal communication can quickly become a public matter. Verbal communication, and every form of written communication has permanence. There should be no expectation of privacy.

### **Guidelines for the Use of Email, Text Messages, and Video Chatting**

1. Video chatting is never appropriate with minors or vulnerable adults and should be prohibited.
2. Adults should not engage in private messaging, text, email, or through social media, with minors/vulnerable adults. If there is a need to communicate by text message to a minor/vulnerable adult, then the adult should do so by including the parent, or guardian, or another adult staff person in the message. It is a better practice to use a group messaging service such as Flocknote to send your communication to the entire group of people with who you minister.
3. Maintain transparency in all communications by being clear in stating who, what, when, where, how, and why.
4. Professional conduct should be used, not only with minors, but also the general public.
5. Keep in mind that humor and sarcasm can be easily misinterpreted and a statement or joke may seem harmless, but may be offensive to someone else.
6. Mandatory reporting guidelines apply to all methods of communication.
7. 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.)
8. Maintain a separate e-mail or text messaging account for your professional communication and only use this account when communicating with minors or vulnerable adults.
9. Church Personnel must maintain professionalism and appropriate boundaries in all communication.
10. Personnel should set and communicate the time that is acceptable to send or receive an email or text message for work purposes. If you are accessing your ministry/group site late in the evening hours that has messaging capabilities, privacy setting should be “offline” or “unavailable.”
11. Do not reply to an inappropriate e-mail or text message from anyone, especially a minor or vulnerable adult. Make a copy of such inappropriate communication and notify your Pastor/administrator.

## **Section Six – Online Gaming**

Online gaming has become increasingly popular. Whether it is gaming through a computer or a gaming system such as Xbox and PlayStation, people are able to communicate with friends and anonymous players from around the world through messaging and actual conversations through headsets with microphones.

### **Guidelines for Online Gaming**

1. No adult shall ever knowingly engage in online gaming with a minor with whom he/she ministers/teaches.
2. No adult shall ever add, request to add, or accept a request to add a minor as an online gaming contact.

## Section Seven – Appendix

1. [Charter for the Protection of Young People](#)
2. [Diocese of La Crosse Safe Environment Program](#)
3. [Diocese of La Crosse Safe Environment Training Videos](#)
4. [Diocese of La Crosse Computer Policy](#)
5. NETSMARTZ411: Parents' and guardians' online resource for answering questions about Internet Safety, computers, and the Web. [netsmartz411.org](http://netsmartz411.org)
6. NCMEC: National Center for Missing and Exploited Children  
1-800-843-5678 [missingkids.com](http://missingkids.com)
7. The Nation's Resource Center for Child Protection  
The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children's® (NCMEC) mission is to help prevent child abduction and sexual exploitation; help find missing children; and assist victims of child abduction and sexual exploitation, their families, and the professionals who serve them.
8. Cyber Tipline:  
The Congressionally mandated Cyber Tipline is a reporting mechanism for cases of child sexual exploitation including child pornography, online enticement of children for sex acts, molestation of children outside the family, sex tourism of children, child victims of prostitution, and unsolicited obscene material sent to a child. Reports may be made 24- hours per day, 7 days per week online at [www.cybertipline.com](http://www.cybertipline.com) or by calling 1-800-843- 5678.
9. Internet Crimes Against Children (ICAC)  
The ICAC Task Force Program was created to help State and local law enforcement agencies enhance their investigative response to offenders who use the Internet, online communication systems, or other computer technology to sexually exploit children. The program is currently composed of 59 regional Task Force agencies and is funded by the United States Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention.
10. Vatican News [vaticannews.va](http://vaticannews.va)



