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Facebook, social media can bring church back to its roots

Kate Childs Graham | Feb. 24, 2011

Earlier this month, status update after status update on my Facebook feed announced the release of a new confession iPhone app. If the app was nothing more than a publicity stunt, it would have been worth it as people of every faith persuasion were chatting about it, analyzing it and sometimes laughing about it.

I downloaded the app right away, putting it into a folder with my Liturgy of the Hours app and Rosary app.

I hope, though, that the release of the app was for more than gaining notoriety. My hope is that this app represents an honest attempt to bridge the chasm between faith and social media, a chasm that grows as our culture becomes more and more steeped in discovering ourselves and each other online.

There is no doubt that people of every age, but most especially young people, are expressing their faith online.

I?ve never seen so many variations of Catholic expressed as I have under religion on the info page of my Facebook friends -- progressive Catholic, conservative Catholic, follower of Christ, Catholic feminist, Magestirium Catholic, cafeteria Catholic, Papist, moderate Catholic and so on.

Every Sunday, people update their status on Facebook and Twitter to say they are going to Mass and post reactions to homilies. In between Sundays, popular news articles and videos about the church are shared. And in the lead up to the Super Bowl, I saw more versions of the ?Our Father? than I care to admit.

These are just a few ways people are expressing their faith online.

Certainly, at the global and local level, leaders of the church are trying to uncover the best ways to utilize social media and enhance the faith. Religious orders and parishes are capitalizing on Facebook and Twitter to build and educate their community.

This January, Pope Benedict XVI even blessed social networking, stating, ?I would like then to invite Christians, confidently and with an informed and responsible creativity, to join the network of relationships which the digital era has made possible.?

Social media is just that -- social. As the pope said: It is a network of relationships.

And it can?t stop at the church hierarchy using social media only as a platform to disseminate information, without entering into dialogue with all those Catholics who are expressing our faith online. Social media is a conversation, an opportunity to build relationships.

Too often, I think, we disregard social media as an inappropriate or less-than replacement for face-to-face contact. We say that you can?t build real or deep relationships online. To be honest, I?m not sure you can.

However, I know that people are trying, and certainly the way social media is hardwired into the mind, body and soul of younger generations is almost impossible to explain and hard to understand.

In his remarks, the pope concluded: ?It is important always to remember that virtual contact cannot and must not take the place of direct human contact with people at every level of our lives.?

He?s right. Social media cannot and should not replace ?direct human contact.? At the same time, we can no longer afford to see it as an either/or.

We need to treat social media with the same regard as we treat in-person interactions. We need to plan for it in the same ways. We need to follow the same rules of loving our neighbor and our God. We need to use social media to enhance in-person connections, and face-to-face encounters to enhance social media.

It?ll be twice the work and a great challenge to build the Catholic community both online and in-person, but I think with the right attentiveness we will see twice the reward.

We will see a church that not only sees the ?signs of the times? but is that sign. At its core, Catholicism has always been a crowd-sourced faith, and there is every reason to use the gift of social media to continue that beautiful tradition.

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