

# Use of Social Media by Catholic Organizations

by Karl Bridges

## Introduction

Social media is now a dominant force in the online world. Tools such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are new forms of communication, drastically altering how organizations interact with the public. By examining the use of social media by Catholic non-profit organizations, it is possible to see how those organizations are exploiting (or not) social media to advance their agendas.

This paper seeks to examine three research questions: 1) What content do Catholic non-profit websites contain? 2) What is the level of use of social media in Catholic non-profit websites generally? 3) What is the level of use of social media by organizations directly connected with the Catholic Church (e.g., parishes, missions, etc.)?

It should be noted that for purposes of this study, for-profit Catholic entities, such as online bookstores and on-line dating sites, were excluded. The websites examined may have a commercial aspect (e.g., online gift sales), but that is not their primary focus. The goals, technical resources, and funding sources of commercial operations are very different from non-profits and excluding them provides more focused results. In this article, websites were examined to determine their use of social media and a numerical rating scale was developed to compare the various rates of implementation.

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## Literature Review

A 2011 article, “Web 2.0 Applications in Government Web Sites” by Chua and Goh, found that more advanced countries had more social media applications and that implementation of these applications had a correlation with both website and service quality. Chua and Goh in particular mention that there are a variety of different classification schemes that have been used in research to classify Web 2.0 applications. An article by researcher Helena Coelho, also in 2011, performing a multiyear analysis of Portuguese universities, found that Web 2.0 tools were increasingly used over time and that they were primarily used for informational purposes rather than collaboration. Although there is extensive literature available on social media in general and the use of social media in other non-profit settings, such as libraries, the research literature on the use of social media by Catholic non-profits appears to be almost nonexistent. A November 2012 search of EBSCOhost’s Religion and Philosophy Collection on “catholic church” and “social media” found only six articles—none of which dealt with pastoral ministry or technical issues.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Alton Y. K. Chua, Dion H. Goh, and Rebecca P. Ang, “Web 2.0 Applications in Government Web Sites: Prevalence, Use and Correlations

## Selection of Websites

One hundred ninety five websites were selected using a range of different tools. Sites were found by using search terms such as “Catholic Church,” “Catholicism,” and “Roman Catholic” on online search engines, such as Google and Yahoo. Print reference works, such as the National Catholic Directory and the National Directory of Associations, were also used to identify organizations, which were then searched on the Internet. Links were followed from those websites to find other websites that might be of interest. The websites selected were from the United States, Canada, Ireland, and the United Kingdom. They were all in English—with the exception of the Canadian websites, which, in accordance with Canadian law, were also offered in French. From this initial list of 195, arranged in alphabetical order by title, every third website was selected, yielding a sub-sample of sixty five.

As will be discussed below in coding, eight different subject categories were designated and each website was assigned to one of these categories:

Catholic Church—sites directly operated by the Catholic Church, e.g. dioceses and individual churches engaged directly in ministry

Media—journals, newspapers, and online media outlets

Apologetics—sites working to promote Catholic doctrine

Professional—sites promoting Catholic life and faith in regards to specific professions or trade (e.g., medicine or security)

Scholarly—primarily research websites (e.g., archives)

Education—related to K-12 and higher education

Health Care—hospitals and nursing homes

Social Work—charities, missions, and social service

In some cases, there was a distinct overlap. A religious order, for example, has both charitable and religious aspects. In those cases, the group was placed where the majority of its work was centered. Religious orders, for example, were classified under Catholic Church since they are primarily ministries. Catholic hospitals were placed in Health Care even though they obviously have a strong component of religious social service.

## Coding

Coding for this research took two forms. First, each website was classified into a category, as discussed under the heading Selection of Websites. Then each website was further individually coded as to whether or not it had any of twenty-five separate elements defined below:

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with Perceived Web Site Quality,” *Online Information Review* 36, no. 2 (2012): 175-195; Helena Sofia Coelho, “Web 2.0 in Academic Libraries in Portuguese Public Universities: A Longitudinal Study,” *Libri: International Journal of Libraries & Information Services* 61, no. 4 (2011): 249-257.

**Table 1**

## Elements of Coding

About	Newsletters/Journals
Archival Collections	Organizational Information
Articles	Photos
Audio Files	Podcasts
Awards	Readings/Position Papers
Blog	Scholarships
Conferences	Events
Contact Information	Store
Donations	Videos
History	Weblinks
Facebook	Twitter
Job Listings	YouTube
News	

**Research Method and Procedure**

Each website was classified into a particular category, as described above. Then each website was individually reviewed. The particular elements of each website were individually coded and results were analyzed. For the purposes of this research, there was only an analysis of the presence of various informational elements. Except in a most general and anecdotal way, as will be discussed in the conclusion, no attempt was made to analyze the layout and organization of the websites and what effect, if any, these had on the use of social media. Using this classification, it was then determined what Web 2.0 applications were in use by the organizations, both collectively and by the type of organization. Finally, a numeric ranking scheme was used to determine the extent or penetration of Web 2.0 applications within the organizations.

**Findings***General Observations*

Table 2 demonstrates that there is a wide variety of content provided on the websites of Catholic groups. The vast majority of organizations make use of their websites to convey organizational information, with categories such as contact (93.85 percent), about (90.77 percent), organizational (78.46 percent), news (69.23 percent), and articles (60 percent) appearing on many sites. Additional content seems to be focused on issues such as membership (29.33 percent), conference information (29.23 percent), and fund raising (35.38 percent). In general it seems that Catholic organizations in this sample make use of their websites to replace and/or supplement traditional non-web communication channels, although there has been no direct comparative measurement of use of paper communications.

**Table 2**

## Catholic Non-Profit Website Activity

Awards	3.08%
Podcast	4.62%
Scholarships	6.15%
Archival Collections	7.69%
Blog	7.69%
Readings/Position Papers	7.69%
Audios	7.69%
Newsletters/Journals	9.23%
Job Listings	18.46%
Videos	21.54%
Store	23.08%
YouTube	23.08%
Membership Info	29.23%
Conferences	29.23%
Twitter	32.31%
History	32.31%
Special Events	33.85%
Donation	35.38%
Facebook	41.54%
Weblinks	49.23%
Photos	50.77%
Articles	60.00%
News	69.23%
Mission	73.85%
Org. Info	78.46%
About	90.77%
Contact	93.85%

*Numerical Rankings of Web 2.0 Usage*

Examining whether organizations make use of multiple forms of social media is one useful method of determining the significance of these tools within the organization. For the purposes of this research, a classification scheme using the system developed by Coelho as a base was utilized. Coelho developed a multiple level organization structure ranging from Level Zero—Absence of Web 2.0 Tools to Level Six, which had integration of multiple Web 2.0 tools with library resources. Unlike Coelho, we did not attempt to measure the integration of the usage of the various social media tools but focused on simply measuring the number of tools in use. A higher numbers of tools would imply higher integration but no attempt was made, based on the relatively small sample size and limited knowledge of the organization's web strategy, to postulate an overall integration level.

The results in Table 3 show that half of the websites (52.31 percent) make no use of social media while 47.69 percent use one or more forms. The number of websites making use of three or four social media tools was very small—only 13.85 and 1.54 percent respectively. When combined with the results discussed above in Figure 2, it's clear that Catholic social media use is limited. As will be discussed in the conclusion, the low use of social media tools has distinct implications for the success of Catholic non-profits in the modern online environment.

**Table 3**

Number of Social Media Tools Used

	Number	Percentage
0 social media tools used	34	52.31
1 social media tool used	8	12.31
2 social media tools used	13	20.00
3 social media tools used	9	13.85
4 social media tools used	1	1.54

*Availability of Web 2.0 Applications*

Table 3 shows that there is some penetration of social media among the sample group. While the majority of websites are not using social media tools (52.31 percent), there are a number that are using just one (12.31 percent) or two (twenty percent). This would suggest that websites using social media are concentrating their efforts on a single medium—such as Facebook or Twitter—rather than evenly distributing their resources across all available social media tools.

As can be seen from Table/Figure 4, podcasting is significantly less popular than any of the other three social media forms measured. Although it is rapidly becoming easier to create podcasts than it was several years ago, it is still significantly more complicated and time consuming. Podcasting also requires both technical expertise and equipment that this low level of usage suggests is unavailable to those contributing to Catholic non-profit websites, or that, if available, they are choosing not to use.

**Table/Figure 4**

About	93.75%
Contact	93.75%
News	75.00%
Mission	75.00%
Org. Information	68.75%
History	62.50%
Weblinks	62.50%
Photos	62.50%
Articles	62.50%
Readings/Position Papers	62.50%
<b>Facebook</b>	<b>43.75%</b>
Donations	43.75%
<b>YouTube</b>	<b>37.50%</b>
<b>Twitter</b>	<b>31.25%</b>
Special Events	31.25%
Blog	18.75%
Newsletters	18.75%
Videos	18.75%
Conferences	12.50%
Job Listings	12.50%
Archival Collection	6.25%
Audios	6.25%
Store	6.25%
Staff	6.25%
Scholarships	6.25%
<b>Podcasts</b>	<b>0.00%</b>
Members	0.00%
Awards	0.00%

YouTube, with its ability to easily upload videos, even from laptops or cell phones, sits somewhere in the middle. The ready availability and growing amounts of digital content, from cell phones or from other filmed events, could suggest that the use of YouTube represents a repurposing of content created for other purposes into a social media stream. For the most part, this appears restricted to the use of Facebook and Twitter followed by YouTube and podcasting. This usage pattern would suggest that Catholic non-profits are using social media, such as Facebook and Twitter, that are commonly available and have relatively low barriers to entry both in terms of financial cost and training.

A comparison of the usage of social media by websites designated Catholic Church to websites in other classifications was considered, but it was determined that the sample size in this research was too small for such comparisons to be meaningful. From these numbers, it does seem clear that the Catholic Church, while making some use of social media, is not making use of more sophisticated social media tools, such as podcasting. Given the assumption that the Catholic Church has more resources and expertise than any other Catholic non-profits, it would be presumed that the participation rates of other Catholic non-profits with social media would be lower, with the possible exception of professional media outlets. The proving of such a hypothesis would require further research.

## **Discussion**

It seems clear from these results that Catholic non-profits are making some use of web-based tools in order to accomplish their mission. It seems equally clear that the majority of these uses are not focused on the use and development of social media but, as suggested above, on the use of the web as replacement for traditional publication channels.

No formal effort at a usability analysis of these websites was performed. It was anecdotally observed in the review of the websites that there did seem to be a wide variation in the organization and quality of website presentation. Some websites, especially those from larger organizations, were extremely well organized and showed excellent design—and, in many cases, were clearly labeled as developed by professional website designers. Other websites were clearly designed with little or no regard to current standards of professional web design. In particular, it is noted that there seemed to be little effort to maintain the standards of the Americans with Disabilities Act, which places an emphasis on making website content available to those with sensory or motor impairments.

A study by the Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate shows that only four percent of Catholics described themselves as “very” involved in parish life. At the same time, research by the Pew Foundation shows that seventy three percent of American teenagers use social networking, as do forty seven percent of adults. The increased use of social media tools like YouTube and others could be a valuable pastoral tool in reaching these populations.<sup>2</sup>

Why are parishes not making use of these social media tools? Various reasons can be suggested. First are the simple issues of the lack of funding and the unavailability of technical expertise. Many organizations, especially parishes, work with an extremely low resource base. To place much more than a simple listing of resources and contact information on their website is a high expectation. In addition, given the shortage of priests and the demands on their time, the use of electronic media is simply not a priority. This situation is exacerbated by the age of many priests who, unlike the younger members of their parishes, came of age in a non-computer era. This is further compounded by the fact that seminary education is primarily focused on theology and practical ministry and not on education in the use of technology for pastoral outreach.

Catholic organizations in general seem to share these problems. In some cases, such as in some evangelization ministries, the use of social media is more sophisticated—as is the case with very well-funded parts of the Church, such as the Vatican; national organizations, such as the National Conference of Bishops; and private organizations in the media, such as newspapers and television outlets, which by nature are focused on an advanced understand-

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<sup>2</sup> Center for Applied Research in the Apostolate, “Religious Devotions and Practices,” <http://cara.georgetown.edu/CARAServices/FRStats/devotion-practice.pdf>; Amanda Lenhart et al., “Social Media & Mobile Internet Use Among Teens and Young Adults,” *Pew Internet and American Life Project*, 2010, [http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP\\_Social\\_Media\\_and\\_Young\\_Adults\\_Report\\_Final\\_with\\_toplevels.pdf](http://www.pewinternet.org/~media/Files/Reports/2010/PIP_Social_Media_and_Young_Adults_Report_Final_with_toplevels.pdf).

ing of modern communication techniques. So, this tells us nothing that we don't already know. This research only puts numbers on what those participating in Catholic activity already understand by experience and anecdote—a phenomenon already well documented in other areas, such as library science. There is a substantial digital divide between different elements of the Church.

The question then becomes: How does the Church avoid these problems? In the long term it suggests that it would be useful for seminaries and religious institutes to be more proactive in including training in social media tools as part of the curriculum. It seems clear that: 1) the subject of content analysis of Catholic non-profits should be addressed in future research to determine what effects, if any, design components have on website usability; and 2) training and education of staff in Catholic non-profits regarding basic web design principles and best practices would be beneficial—especially if it could be offered online at a nominal cost.

### **Using Social Media: Some Basic Steps**

A reasonable first step is to ask: Does the parish want to do this? If it is a parish where the economics or the demographics are such that social media isn't an option, one should admit that fact and move on. It's not that it isn't desirable, but the Church lives in the world. A focus on technological innovation at the expense of the fundamental mission of the Church and the need for charity is a false advance. In most cases, however, a simple survey of interest will find that people will appreciate the use of social media, especially if it will make it easier for them to participate in the parish by having better information about parish activities. An appropriate approach might be to promote this as a logical extension of existing evangelization efforts and to stress that the resources to be used will not detract from the central activities of the parish. Having a well-written plan, some well-produced examples, and a clear structure for measuring the effectiveness of the project would go a long way in marshaling support. Several parishes might want to collaborate on a project by sharing equipment and expertise.

Rarely is the integration of social media into daily pastoral ministry a technological issue. It is a people issue. It is easy to see the technological problems—getting equipment, creating web accounts, uploading documents—as the main problem, but the real concern is having people willing and able to accomplish these tasks. In many instances, there may already be an identified group of people who have some technological expertise within the parish, such as a committee that deals with the website, produces the parish newsletter, or makes videos of parish events. In particular, this might be an area in which the teenage members of the parish, under appropriate adult supervision, could make a real contribution. Young adults often have a facility with this technology that their elders lack, although they sometimes also have a corresponding lack of mature judgment—hence the need for adult guidance.

It would be vital in these instances to also make sure that whoever is engaged in these projects has an active involvement with the various other ministries of the church so all are on board with the endeavor. It may be possible to simply include this activity in an existing committee (Audio Visual, for example) or ministry. It might be profitable to twin social media engagement with some existing program, such as RCIA. Converts are often quite enthusiastic and would readily engage with such a project—which also gives them an opportunity to get to know the people in the parish and vice versa. Service projects for various youth groups are also an obvious source of volunteers.

The second issue is the kind of content the parish wishes to have available. The obvious first thoughts, such as videos of church services for YouTube, may not be appropriate. Doing this kind of videography in a large space presents technical problems of sound and lighting, as well as possibly being disruptive to the services. In addition, some people would probably prefer not to be videoed in their public worship. More to the point, what one wants



to do in the early stages of this kind of project is create an audience; smaller and more personal projects might be more appropriate.

One excellent example would be to simply have someone go through some basic practice of the Church, such as saying the Rosary. A simple ten or fifteen minute explanation with someone explaining the Rosary, its associated prayers, and its history could be quite effective and, often, could involve no more than the volunteer sitting in front of a laptop webcam. One good example can be found on YouTube. A young woman in one clip walks people through the Rosary—the how and the why.<sup>3</sup> It is something simple and clear, without fancy special effects or even a display of film editing techniques. It may be desirable to post videos of parish events, especially those that have wide interest (for example, a May Day celebration or a school graduation). Interviews with elderly members of the parish might be appropriate and appreciated. Some training or interest in how to do oral history would be helpful, but the results, when done properly, could add greatly to the historical knowledge and dimension of the parish. Another thought might be to video RCIA classes—making them available both online and in the parish library might be useful.

The proper selection of the right social media tool is important. A good use of Twitter with its 140 character limit might simply be to remind people, “This Tuesday is a day of obligation. Mass at 9, 12 and 6,” or for unexpected events, “I will be 15 minutes late to hear confessions today. Please wait.” These informal Twitter posts make it easy to communicate with the parish, especially if the priest serves multiple parishes. Twitter is not, however, a good place to discuss theological issues or answer any but the simplest questions.

The proper use of non-technological media is also important. In essence, you are creating a new group of users from the potential audience that exists within the parish. Thus, an important aspect of implementing new media is making sure that parishioners are aware of what is going on. This may require some publicity, the creation of some training and advertising materials, and making people aware of the help that is available. This doesn't necessarily mean having to set up a program of parish training classes, but it may mean allowing space in the weekly bulletin to make people aware of community resources, such as training sessions at their local public library in the use of Twitter. However, it might be productive to make space available for workshops taught by interested and knowledgeable parishioners. As a way to encourage interest and participation by parishioners, the development of small, focused social media projects would seem to be a highly effective strategy.

## Conclusion

Clearly the Internet and the use of social media are no substitute for religious practice. Catholicism by its nature requires the community of believers to be physically engaged with the Real Presence and the sacraments. The use of social media, however, can be an effective informational tool that can encourage parishioners to be active and involved in their parishes while allowing clergy to interact with their congregants.

The use and value of the Internet in Catholic ministry is widely recognized by the Church. A variety of pronouncements and studies have emphasized the appropriate use of the Internet in evangelization efforts. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications stated that:

The Church's interest in the Internet is a particular expression of her longstanding interest in the media of social communication. Seeing the media as an outcome of the historical scientific process by which humankind “advances further and further in the discovery of

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<sup>3</sup> John P. Foley, “The Church and Internet,” *The Pontifical Council for Social Communications*, 2002, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html).

the resources and values contained in the whole of creation,” the Church often has declared her conviction that they are, in the words of the Second Vatican Council, “marvelous technical inventions” that already do much to meet human needs and may yet do even more.<sup>4</sup>

It would seem that an organized effort to promote the adoption of social media resources throughout the Church would be useful. This would allow the message of the Church to be more universally available and promote better coordination between the various different elements that comprise the Church.

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<sup>4</sup> Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *The Church and the Internet I*, 1. [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/pontifical\\_councils/pccs/documents/rc\\_pc\\_pccs\\_doc\\_20020228\\_church-internet\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_20020228_church-internet_en.html).