



GUIDE TO SOCIAL MEDIA FOR PARISHES



PREPARED BY THE AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC MEDIA COUNCIL

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FOREWORD

“Stories leave their mark on us; they shape our convictions and our behaviour. They can help us understand and communicate who we are.”

- Pope Francis, message for the 54th World Communications Day

Dear sisters and brothers in Christ,

In his message for the 54th World Communications Day, which is celebrated in Australia on May 17, 2020, Pope Francis reflects on the rich tradition of storytelling, drawing from the Book of Exodus: “That you may tell your children and grandchildren.”

Indeed, storytelling has been central to the Christian life since the time of Jesus Christ and extends back through Jewish history in the Old Testament and in many other faiths and cultures. The Gospels have been described as “the greatest story ever told”, and certainly must be the story told most often.

But the story of the Gospel today isn’t told only through those ancient texts. It is told in the life of our Catholic families and communities. It is told in the vibrant life of a parish.

Social media is a tool through which the stories of our communities can be told using a range of mediums. At its best, social media helps build human relationships, augments the human interaction that we have IRL – “in real life”.

This social media guide was developed over several months, incorporating feedback from people working in parishes. It couldn’t have been foreseen just how much technology would become central to the life of our Church and our worship.

The COVID-19 experience has, in some ways, necessitated a journey into digital communications that had previously been slow to develop. Since early this century, three successive Popes have spoken about the opportunities that the internet, social media and other digital platforms provide for the Church. They’ve also noted that those platforms can be used for destructive behaviours like trolling, the sharing of illegal and immoral content, and the spread of “fake news”.

The Church is called to harness the good of social media, being faithful witnesses in the content we share and in the ways that we use digital technology.

This guide focuses particularly on the use of Facebook and Instagram – the two most used and, we believe, the most practical social platforms for parishes. It is designed to be a practical and living document, so parishes and other ministries are invited to offer feedback on the usefulness of the guide and also ask questions about other aspects of online communications. Please email media@catholic.org.au with that information.

As we celebrate World Communications Day, I leave you with another quote from Pope Francis’ message for this year:

“With the gaze of the great storyteller – the only one who has the ultimate point of view – we can then approach the other characters, our brothers and sisters, who are with us as actors in today’s story.”

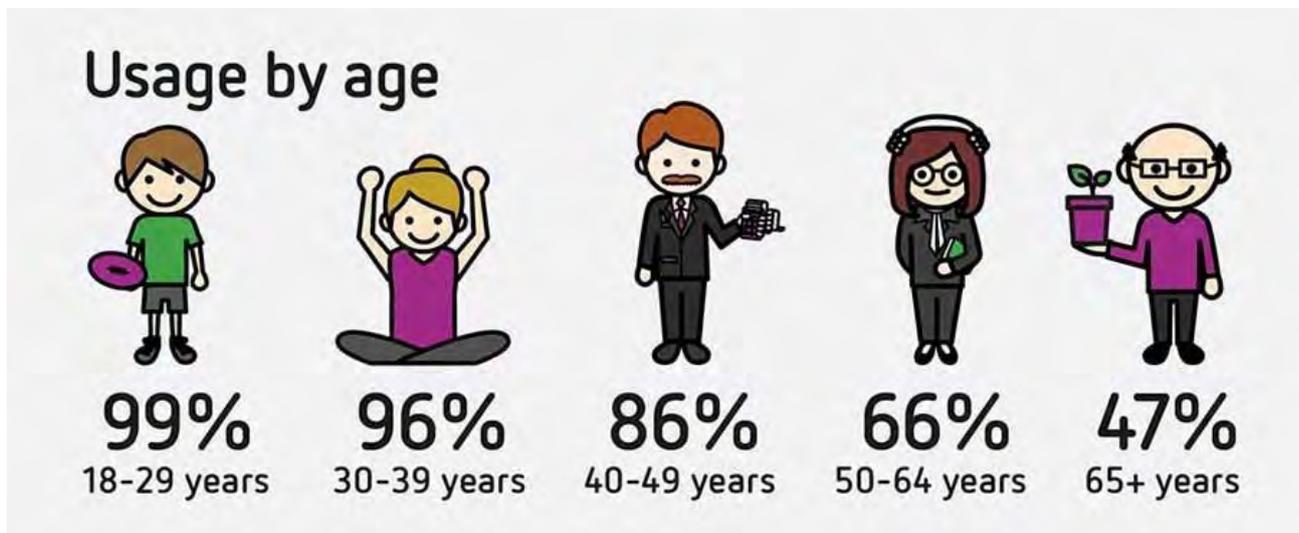
May we be worthy communicators of the life-giving story of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, which is also our own story.

Yours in Christ,
Bishop Patrick O’Regan
Bishop Delegate for Media, Australian Catholic Bishops Conference



WHY SOCIAL MEDIA MATTERS TO YOUR PARISH

Social media is the number one internet destination for millions of Australians today, with almost 80 per cent of Australians using the platform – including 99 per cent of those under 30, but also almost half of those over 65.



Source: [Sensis - 'The must-know stats from the 2018 Yellow Social Media Report' \(2018\)](#)

Social media platforms such as Facebook and Instagram let you both reach new people and strengthen relationships with and between current parishioners. Digitally sharing photos, videos (including live streaming) and articles through social media can translate to real-life conversation-starters between parishioners who might otherwise never talk, despite being in the same congregation for years.

Social media also allows you to reach those who are less socially connected, including those who can't get out of home often – something the COVID-19 experience has given us all a taste of.

The challenges of conflict and oversharing

Of course, social media has limitations and challenges too. Its success is driven by how much you can convince people to use and try it.

Typing or reading text on a screen – the most popular form of social media - eliminates the facial expression and tone of voice that we normally take for granted when interacting in person, which can bring out a side of people that could make social media counterproductive to your mission of using digital means to strengthen your parish spirit. Always encourage civility and mutual respect, and be prepared to stop discussions that become antagonistic.

Its relative anonymity can also encourage “oversharing”, where some people may share deep personal issues, conflicts and complaints that are likely better managed face to face or by phone, rather than publicly. Again, encourage those with such troubles to raise these privately – but don't be so heavy-handed as to discourage openness.

Before you start

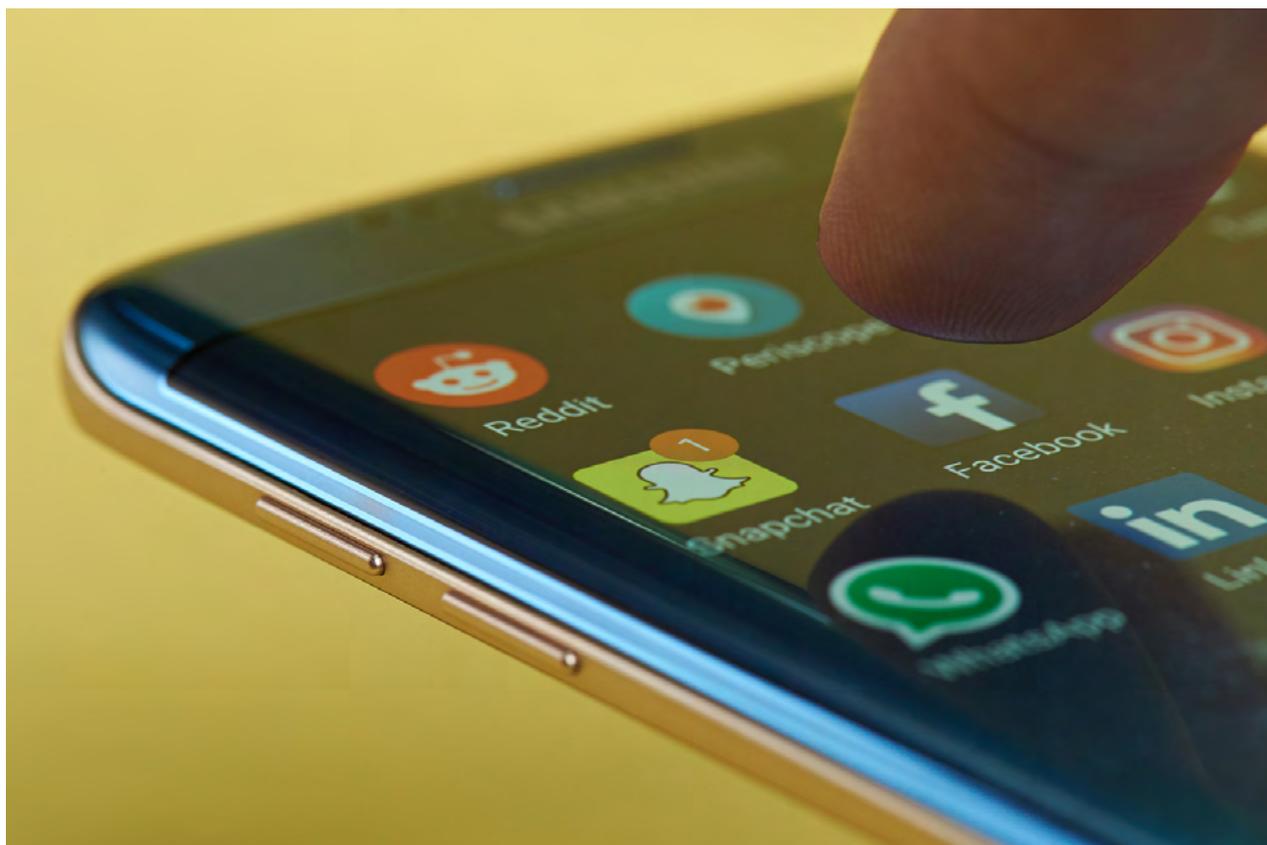
- **Form a social media team:** many hands make light work, but also ensure someone is always keeping an eye on the page if things go awry. You don't want to rely on just yourself, nor only one enthusiastic millennial who may leave or become too busy to run your social media. Too many parishes have seen their social media wither because of a lack of succession planning and sharing of work.

Similarly, you'll want to ensure some form of oversight from senior parishioners and the parish priest to prevent conflicting messages.

- **Decide on your decision-making process:** agree on how you will make decisions within your social media team eg via email, a group Facebook Messenger/WhatsApp/SMS chat.

What will be the approval process for each "post" (things you put on your official social media accounts)? Is your Parish Priest digitally active enough to approve each post, or will he need to allow some discretion by other team members to approve posts? Unlike, say, weekly newsletters and bulletins, social media posts both allow you to reach people faster – but their expectations of timely posts are also higher.

- **Resolve to be conversational:** It's crucial to understand social media is inherently conversational, so the formal tone we inherently use when writing official materials will be a turn-off to your audience, regardless of age. Write as you would say it in real life.





FACEBOOK

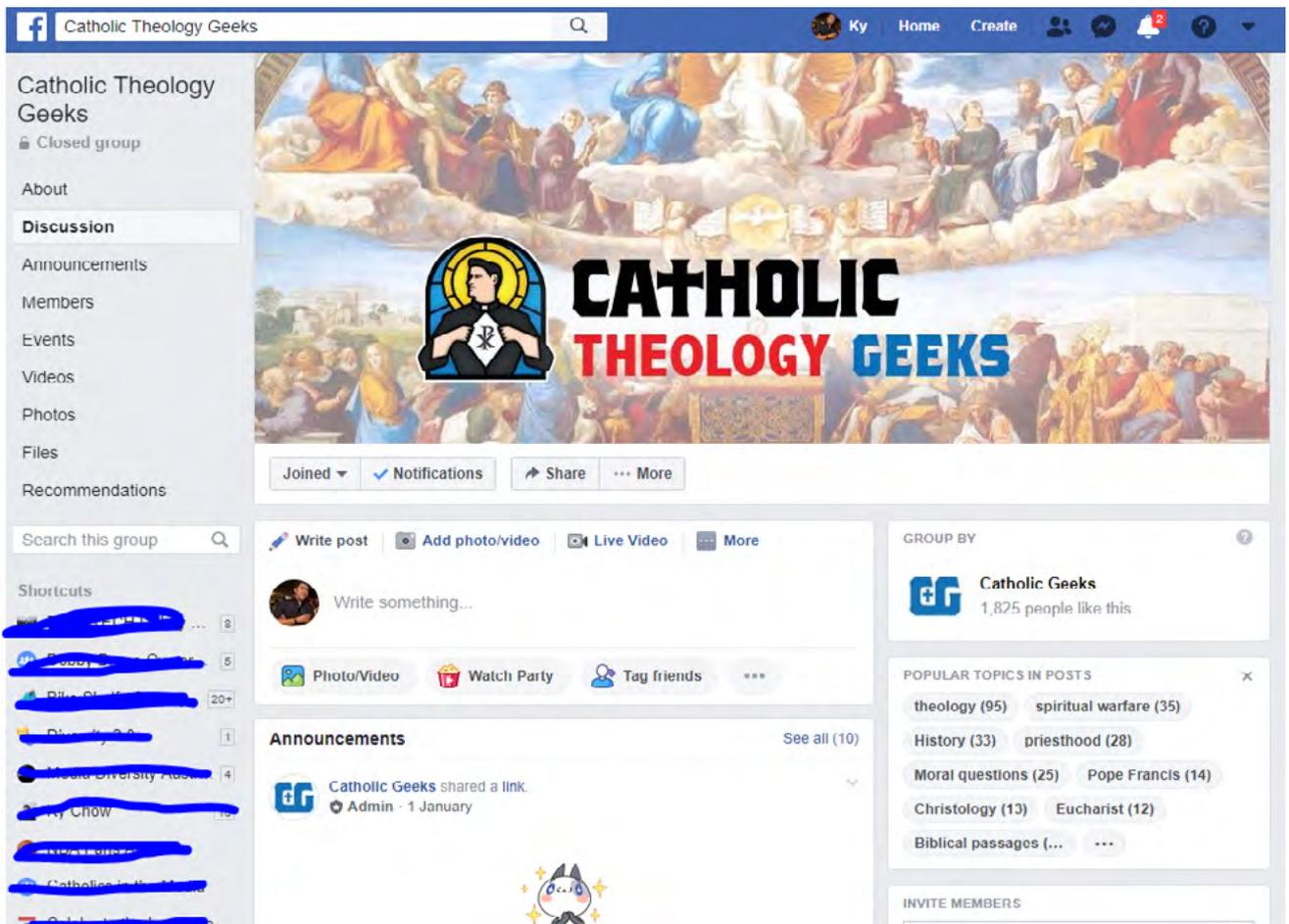
- 2.23 billion active users make it the world’s most popular social media platform.
- About 80% of all men and women who use the internet are on Facebook.
- Appeals to all ages: 62% of online seniors aged 65+ are on Facebook, 88% of online users aged 18-29 (although the youngest users prefer to use Instagram).

You can create both a Facebook “Group” AND Facebook “Page” for your parish - we’ll now explain the pros and cons of both.

Facebook Groups: a more private online forum

Facebook Groups are the equivalent of classic internet discussion forums, which you may have come across for your other areas of interest such as sport, parenting, cameras, technology, culture etc. Unlike those forums or Facebook Pages (more on those later), Facebook Groups allow more frank and honest conversation as they are more private – not everyone can see inside them.

Discussions on Facebook Groups take place in “threads” attached to an original post. Someone will post a question, photo or link and everyone else will react and comment on that original post.



Advantages of Groups

- **Conversation starters:** they encourage digital discussion between parishioners about parish matters that can then prompt more face-to-face chat after Mass.
- **Relatively low maintenance:** discussion topics are decided by people in the group, so parish social media teams need only post if they want or need to (such as in the early days to get things started).
- **People can post and discuss almost anything:**
 - Photos of parish events and parishioners.
 - Photos of a parishioner including a little story about them.
 - Links, including to online articles about their faith.
 - Event pages for parish events.
 - Live streaming video such as Masses, Q and A sessions at home etc.
 - Discussion about homilies, world events or news that affect your parish.
 - Non-religious but useful content that can help fortify community spirit, for example, asking for tips on restaurants or schools, ideas for parents to entertain kids from the parish school during holidays etc.
- **Easy to control who can participate:** Unlike Facebook Pages, which are public, the social media team can control who can come in or out of the Group, and also choose to approve posts. When setting up a Facebook Group, you can choose whether it should be:
 - **Closed:** a moderator (priest or otherwise) must approve every person who enters the group. This ensures privacy and thus open conversation. A moderator, however, can also delete posts and comments by parishioners, which may become necessary if discussion becomes acrimonious (see below).
 - **Secret:** will be hard for people to join, unless invited by other parishioners.
 - **Open:** anyone can join and participate in discussion - not recommended as it may deter activity since the whole world can see everything in the group.



Disadvantages of Groups

The potential for acrimony and people taking offence can be a major challenge for a moderator/admin of a group to manage.

- **Keyboard anonymity = emotion:** Without face-to-face contact, people can be emotional and even hostile in a way you would not expect them to act in real life. If you have ever participated in online forums for your hobbies, work, politics, religion etc, you will be aware of the likelihood a discussion can become heated, which could potentially cause rifts between people in real life and deter people from participating.
- **Moderator/Admin responsibilities:** as the creator of the page, you will need to take responsibility for removing offensive posts or even users altogether, while explaining such decisions. Only delete or block people as a last resort, as this discourages openness.
- **Conflict resolution or inappropriate posts:** if people's disagreements or sharing of personal issues gets out of hand, personally message or call them to ask them to stop and possibly discuss in private instead. If someone is a serial offender, you may need to remove them from the Group – though this should be a last resort.
- **Prevention:** set "Group Rules" in your Group Description (which everyone will see) that people should only write things they can visualise themselves saying to a fellow parishioner the next time they see them at Mass (which they will!).

Get started: creating a Facebook Group

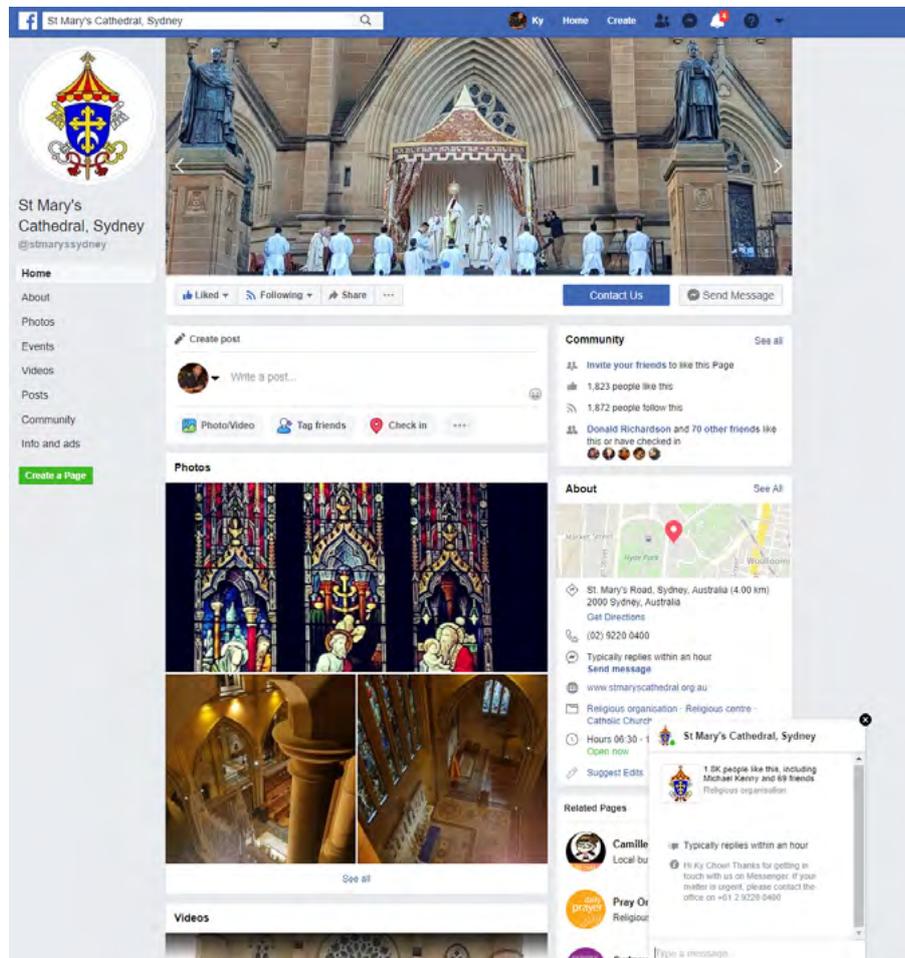
Simply follow this link for instructions on how to create your Group. https://www.facebook.com/help/167970719931213?helpref=about_content

Facebook Pages

Facebook's version of a brochure and newsletter, Pages are your "official" and public presence. People follow them by "Liking" a Page – essentially a free subscription. Any member of the public can do so and see all comments and posts within, which gives them unique advantages and drawbacks.

Advantages of Pages

- **Makes it easy for new people to "discover" your parish.** You can link to your Facebook Page from emails, messages etc knowing people can instantly see all the (hopefully appealing) content that is on them, and follow the Pages easily.
- **Can be boosted (ie advertised).** Unlike Groups, you can pay for Facebook to advertise your Page ie by inserting it into people's Facebook feeds. Given budgetary constraints faced by some parishes, this may not be an option for many.
- **You can post content that you're happy to be public.** Examples of good Facebook Page content:
 - Updates about changes in Mass times and other public information.
 - Photos and videos (including live streams of Mass) of your services.
 - Photos and videos of those parishioners and public representatives such as priests who are happy to be seen by the public.
 - Links to your official Parish websites.
 - Facebook Events that are open to the public, such as Christmas and Easter services, First Holy Communion dates etc.



Disadvantages of Pages

- **They are public, not private:** any photos you put up will be viewable by anyone who “Likes” your page. You have no control over who can “Like” your page and thus anyone can see what is on it, which makes them more open and easier to discover than Groups, but you may want to avoid putting more intimate content on it eg photos of families, children etc.
- **Not very visible unless people go looking for the Page:** while Pages show up in Facebook search, which is a big way people find things on Facebook, they are not prominent in people’s feeds (a “feed” being the stream of automatically curated stories and posts Facebook users see) unless you pay for them to be “boosted” ie Facebook can make money.

Get started: creating your Facebook Page

Follow the instructions here: <https://www.facebook.com/pages/creation/>

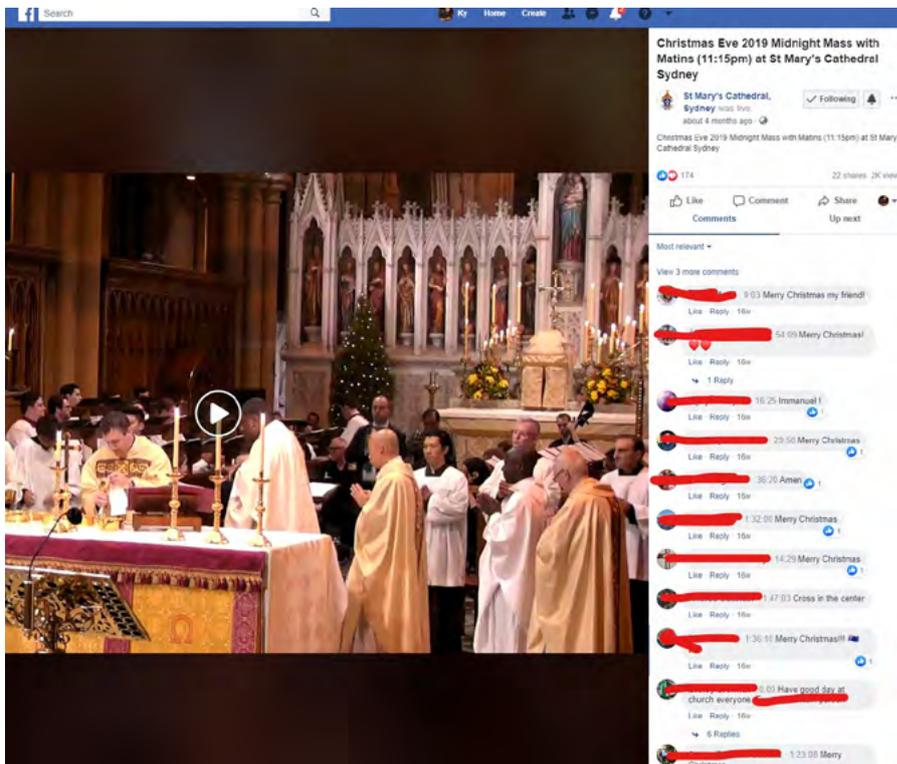
Facebook: Live

Many of you may have come across live video streaming of Masses even before COVID-19 eg live televised Masses from the Vatican via YouTube. Facebook Live allows any user to stream video live, and audiences to react publicly in real time. You don’t need expensive video cameras and equipment – literally just a mobile phone with Facebook installed on it can do the job.

Unlike YouTube, it has the advantage that its videos appear in people’s Facebook feeds live ie the video is already playing as people scroll through their Facebook content, which makes it far more likely for people to stop and watch than a YouTube video, which requires people to actively start playing the video and visit the YouTube page.

- **Video has always been one of the most compelling forms of content on the internet.** A single, well-advertised stream (ie live video post) can generate a huge amount of comments and discussions as the event is happening — far more than most text or photo posts.

This is very useful for events besides Masses, such as a Q and A session or fireside chat with a parish priest from the presbytery. The social isolation rules of COVID-19 and the enormous boost in Facebook viewing



time has seen many creative uses of Facebook Live such as home concerts that recognise traditional, polished expensive video setups are no longer necessary to attract an audience.

- **Promotion is important:** Masses in particular lend themselves well to live streaming because they are at a set time that all parishioners know, so it's easy for people to remember when they are being broadcast. Otherwise, in the lead up to your live event, publicise it via social media, newsletters etc.

This won't always be possible and you can often have luck with spontaneous Facebook Live streams during, say, the evening when you can expect many people will be home and on Facebook.

- **How to use Facebook Live:** Facebook provides a simple guide to [how to stream Facebook Live video](#) but for more detailed instructions about how to live stream Mass and maximise the quality of the video people will watch, see the [guide to live streaming produced by the Catholic Diocese of Parramatta](#).

How to get parishioners to use your Facebook Page or Group

- **Advertise your social media accounts regularly** in Parish Bulletins, existing email newsletters and Mass announcements.
- **Give the right instruction for how to find you:** in your print publications, ask people to **Search** for <name of Parish Facebook Group> on Facebook. Facebook Group URLs (website addresses) are too long to feature in parish bulletins or posters.
- Always try to use **photos** or even videos, not just text, as they stand out far more in a social media feed and Facebook tends to “elevate” such posts compared to plain text.
- **Post frequently to grow your Facebook Groups**, especially in the early days when parishioners may need some encouragement. Remember, your Facebook Page is more like a public brochure; your Facebook Groups are where people connect more deeply.



INSTAGRAM

A positive social media platform focused on photo and video (owned by Facebook)

Audience:

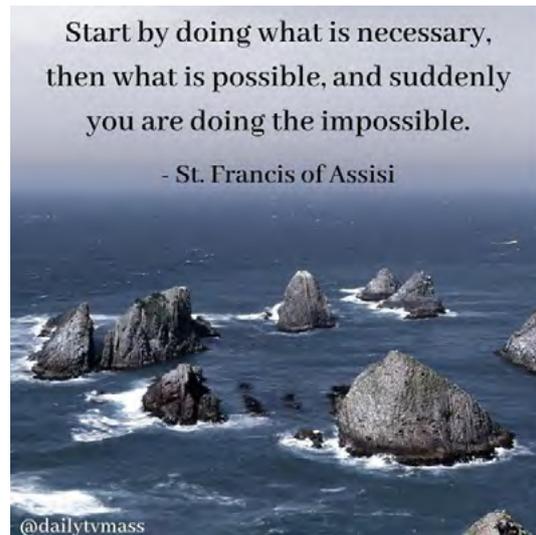
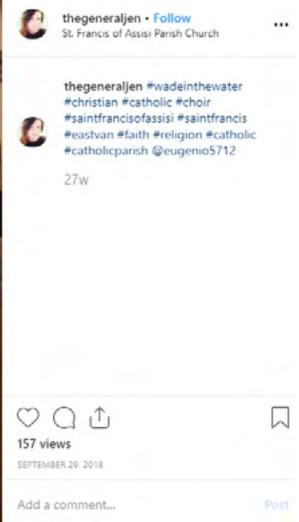
- 1 billion active users
- 68% are female
- 72% of teens on Instagram
- Skewed towards youth: 59% of under 30 young adults use Instagram and 33% of internet users aged 30-49

Advantages

- Heavily image based, which are easier and quicker to share than a written post
- Extremely positive culture, with limited conversation - thus limiting risk of acrimonious arguments and debates

Disadvantages

- Focus on imagery means it's not good for detailed discussion or sharing information such as links to articles
- While very popular among the youth, Facebook is still utilised much more by older parishioners



Getting started: creating an Instagram account

<https://help.instagram.com/155940534568753> (Note: Instagram accounts can only be created on, and content can only be posted via, a mobile device eg a phone or tablet).

What are “hashtags” for?

These are popular on Instagram (and Twitter, but not Facebook), and are crucial for attracting new people to your page. Simply include a hashtag (#) symbol for each post, followed by words you think are popular or searched for eg #sydney #Aussie #church #Catholic #faith #Christ. Your post will then appear in the feeds of Instagram users browsing that category.

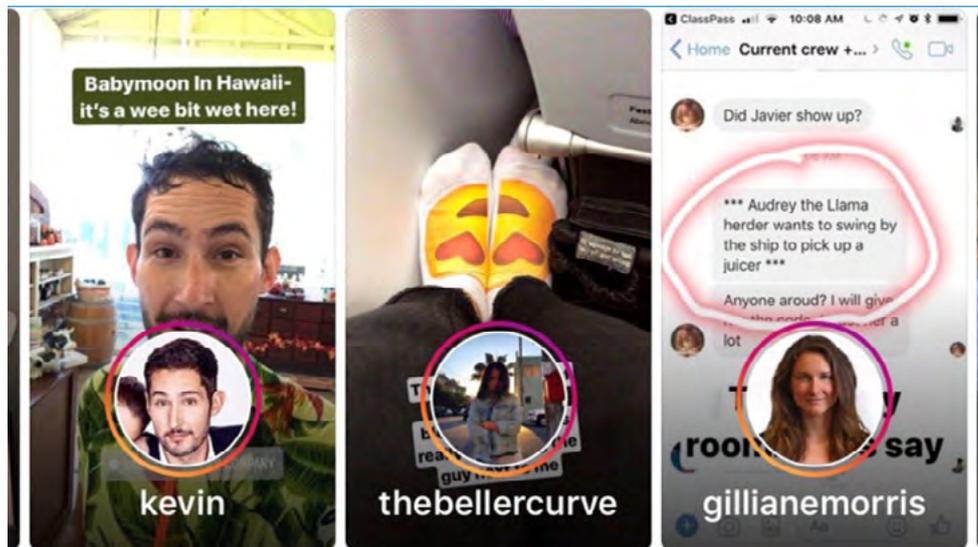
It would also be good to align your content to existing trends. For example, posting #MerryChristmas during Christmas or #PrayForAustralia during times the nation is affected like the bushfires or coronavirus will give your post more reach.

WHAT ARE FACEBOOK AND INSTAGRAM “STORIES”?

Both Facebook and Instagram pinched an idea from their competitor SnapChat: to allow people to post content that was temporary.

While most posts are there forever unless their creator deletes them, “Stories” are less polished, short-lived but popular posts that disappear within a day or two from your account.

“Stories” are popular because they allow mobile phone users to create fun, simple additions to their photo and video such as circling text, making short video montages, drawing etc.



RISKS MODERATORS WILL NEED TO MANAGE

While social media provides a new avenue for previously unengaged parishioners to communicate with you, there are risks:

- People may publicly argue via the comments section of your page or group. Resolving disagreements via writing online, rather than face to face or phone calls, is generally difficult and can create awkward or even acrimonious feeling between more opinionated parishioners.
- Your page or group may be “trolled” - whereby strangers write negative, even nasty comments on your public posts. This may follow negative stories about the Catholic Church as a whole, all the way down to simple personal disputes.
- As with any publication, there is a small chance of legal risk - for example, if someone is defamatory within your group.

Administrators and Moderators

Resolving these risks is up to the Administrator (“admin”) of the page (the person who originally created the page), or Moderators (“mods”) whom the admin appoints. These people have the power to remove or even ban users from a page, as well as prevent further comments on a post or page.

Choose these moderators carefully - they should be calm, impartial and mature enough to treat everyone with respect, and strike a balance between allowing free discussion while also ensuring discussion and comments do not get out of hand.

Given how quickly arguments and criticism can get out of hand, it’s best to have as many moderators as you can trust, ideally people who are digitally engaged.

OTHER SOCIAL MEDIA PLATFORMS



LinkedIn: basically Facebook for professionals. There's minimal value in LinkedIn for parishes given it is primarily geared towards job searches and discussions about corporate and economic matters.

While not useful for Parish communication, it can be a valuable tool for parish priests and staff to connect to Catholics beyond their parishes and internationally.



Slack, Yammer etc: workplace based platforms that are useful for committees to discuss internal issues in well organised threads for different areas.

By following high profile Catholic individuals and organisations, you can stay across the very latest in Catholic news around the world - and of course, the same goes for other topics you may be interested in such as national and international politics.



Snapchat: A popular platform with teenagers and young adults in particular, Snapchat posts are all temporary. Facebook and Instagram Stories have become more popular recently, particularly with adults, so we don't recommend Snapchat accounts unless your social media team is eager to use it.

Beware that everything on Twitter is visible to the whole world, so take care what you write - if at all. You may simply use it to follow other people rather than engage in discussion. Twitter is famous for often acrimonious debate given its focus on controversial news topics.



Twitter: focused on news, posts or "tweets" appear in real time.



WeChat: popular with Asians, especially Chinese, because Facebook and other platforms are banned in China. Most Australian-based Asians use WhatsApp and Facebook extensively, so there's relatively little need to start a WeChat account.

Tweets are limited to 280 characters (or clicks of a keyboard), which is why the platform caters more to quick updates and quick reactions. Thus, unlike Facebook and Instagram, the focus is on discussion, though photos do appear. "Tweets" also often use hashtags, like Instagram.



WhatsApp: a globally popular, secure (data is encrypted) private chat/messaging platform - arguably the most popular in the world. It may be useful for smaller groups who need to communicate with more immediacy, eg Young Adult groups or Committees at your Parish.

WHAT'S NEXT?

If you're new to social media, join a few Facebook Groups and Pages yourself - there's plenty out there - to get a feel for how they work. There are many Catholic groups such as Catholic Geeks, and many large parishes have a Facebook Page.

Then simply use the links above to get started. And make sure you have fun!

If you have questions, email media@catholic.org.au