

Vincentian Fathers and Brothers – Oceania Province – Social Media Policy

Introduction

These guidelines are offered as a synthesis of best practices. They include material compiled from church entities, for-profit corporations and non-profit organizations. Suggestions and comments are welcome at boscm55@gmail.com. In this document, “confrere” is defined as a member of the Congregation of the Mission in the Oceania Province and may include all students who are training for the Community.

Guiding Principles

The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul's exclamation: "Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel" (1 Cor 9:16) – Pope Benedict XVI, 2010 World Communication Day message Social media is one of the fastest growing forms of communication, especially among youth and young adults. As a Community we cannot ignore Social Media as a way in which all confreres can evangelize, no matter what age, but at the same time we must engage Social Media in a manner that is safe and responsible.

The Vincentian Community can use Social Media to encourage respect, dialogue and honest relationships – in other words, “true friendship” (43rd World Communication Day Message). To do so requires us to approach Social Media as a powerful means of evangelization and to consider the Church's role in providing a Christian perspective to digital literacy.

The Church and Social Media: An Overview

The online encyclopedia Wikipedia defines social media as “... media designed to be disseminated through social interaction, using highly accessible and scalable publishing techniques. Social media use web-based technologies to transform and broadcast media monologues into social media dialogues”. Content is no longer the focus of Social Media. Engaging in conversations and building community has since overtaken the content driven digital platform. The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province in the 21st Century is now able to use Social Media to bring good news to the poor, to empower people to bring about systemic change and to garner support for projects assisting in the alleviation of poverty, alienation and discrimination. This is an opportunity for each confreres to engage in real personal witness to the Gospel on a global scale.

Social Media offers both opportunities and challenges to us in three areas:-

Visibility: Online Social Media communities are vast and growing at a rapid pace. Given the size and scope of these communities, they offer excellent forums for the Church's visibility and evangelization. The key question that faces those confreres who decide to engage Social Media is: “How will I/We engage?” Careful consideration should be made to determine the particular strengths of each form of Social Media (blogs, social networks, text messaging, etc.) and the needs of the confrere and Community. The strengths should match the needs. For example, the Provincial website is a blog that disseminates information as well as providing opportunities for a) confreres to discuss issues within the community and b) for people to contact us. It is not, however, the best method of the Community reaching out to young people in our society; Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc are the better forums for such evangelization.

Social Media also requires constant input and monitoring to maintain visibility and awareness of the confrere's or Community's presence through a particular Social Media. To keep members, a social networking site needs to have new content on a regular basis as well as provide on-going avenues for conversations to occur.

Community: Social Media can be a powerful tool for not only strengthening face to face community but even building digital community. This is the new element in evangelization – digital community, which is as real as the ordinary communities we interact with on a daily basis face to face. Social Media can support communities in a myriad of ways: connecting people with similar interests, sharing information about in-person events, providing ways for people to dialogue, etc.

Accountability: While Social Media provides a tool for building community, we must remind ourselves that any membership in a community requires accountability and responsibility. Users of Social Media expect site administrators to allow dialogue, to provide information and to acknowledge mistakes. The explosion of information available to Social Media consumers has meant that they often only use information from trusted sites or sites recommended by those whom they trust.

An Opportunity to Evangelize

The reality of the 21st Century society is that many people “live” in the Social Media/Digital continent. It is their first avenue for contacting others and sharing ideas. This provides the Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province with an incredible opportunity to bring the good news. It is a way of realizing the Parable of the Sower (Matt13) where a seed is planted and growth can occur with the grace of the Holy Spirit. You do not know who you will have an impact on. The way of Social Media in evangelization is the same as in face to face experiences – a relationship needs to be built and conversations need to occur. This conversation can take in many different subjects, not all of them Church or God related. A seed might be a common interest that can give the confrere to personal witness. All confreres are encouraged to engage in Social Media as a way of ministry in the digital age.

Definitions

Social Media Platforms

Web 2.0: The term "Web 2.0" is commonly associated with Web applications which facilitate interactive information sharing. A Web 2.0 site allows its users to interact with other users, to change Website content, to provide reaction to content, to share the site's content with others, or to filter content being provided by the site creator. This is in contrast to non-interactive websites where users are limited to the passive viewing of information that is provided to them. The Provincial website is not a “Web 2.0 site, at this stage.

Blog: A blog 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. This is what our Provincial website is, using a platform know as WordPress.

Micro-blog: A form of multimedia blogging that allows users to send brief text updates or micromedia such as photos or audio clips and publish them, either to be viewed by anyone or by a restricted group which can be chosen by the user. The content of a micro-blog differs from a traditional blog in that it is typically smaller in actual size and aggregate file size. Twitter is a good example, entries are limited to 140 characters. The Province has not ventured onto this social media platform yet.

Social Media/Network: A Web 2.0 site that is entirely driven by content of its members. Individuals are allowed flexibility in privacy settings, in posting text, photos, video, links and other information, and in level of interaction with other members. Examples: Facebook, LinkedIn, MySpace, YouTube and Flickr are often also included in lists of social networking sites. The Province has not ventured onto this Social Media platform yet.

Personal website: A social network page, blog or any Internet website/tool created by confreres primarily to share personal communication with friends and family.

Confrere: those who are members of the Congregation of the Mission or who are in formation to be a member of the Congregation.

Child: a person under 18 years of age or a physically or mentally disabled person under 21 years of age.

Policy Statement

The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province recognize that in today's environment, with the increasing prevalence of the Social Media, confreres will use the Social Media to conduct ministry work and to communicate with associates and friends. Social Media provides various ways for individuals to interact and has changed the way we communicate and share information. The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province views Social Media as an important evangelizing tool to promote its mission. All confreres are encouraged to support this ministry and, if engaged with Social Media platforms, to gain the necessary training to interact in the digital sphere safely and responsibly. However, those using Social Media should bear in mind that certain comments and information may have a harmful effect on The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province and the Church. In light of this possibility, confreres are required to adhere to the following policy regarding the use of Social Media platforms.

Procedure

Password-Protected Sites

Websites may involve registration – the use of a username/password or other such means to access all or portions of the site. It is not appropriate for a confrere to give a child access to a website that is not otherwise openly accessible to the public without obtaining the permission and granting the same access to the child's parent/guardian.

Personal Websites and Ministry Blogs

The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province recognize that confreres may create personal websites/ministry blogs as a medium of self-expression. Confreres must recognize that anything published on a personal website/ministry blog is no different from making such information available in any public forum. Any information that causes or has the potential to cause embarrassment to The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province and the Catholic Church should be avoided. It is advisable that confreres do not use their personal website/ministry blog to conduct the ministries of The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province, without the permission of the Visitor.

Confidential and Proprietary Information

Confreres are prohibited from disclosing via Social Media information that is understood to be held in confidence by The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province, except by explicit permission of the Visitor. There is also need for confreres to be aware of the dangers of too much personal disclosure on Social Media platforms.

Inappropriate Language and Images

The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province and the Catholic Church will not tolerate confreres posting obscene, harassing, offensive, derogatory, defamatory or otherwise potentially scandalous comments, links and/or images which reflect discredit or cause embarrassment to the Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province or to the Church. Any activity via Social Media or other Electronic Communication that contains any of the above and/or reflects negatively on the Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province and the Church is prohibited.

Protection of Children

Confreres of the Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province will comply with all aspects of the "Towards Healing" and the "Integrity in Ministry" documents.

When Communicating with Children Using Social Media or Other Electronic Communication:

- Personal Social Media accounts must not be used for ministry communication. The proper avenue for this purpose is via a Community Social Media account.
- The primary purpose of such communication shall be for providing information related to a ministry or event and not for socialization or other personal interaction. Counselling of children through such communication methods is not permitted.

- Social Media/Network or other electronic communication may not be used to communicate with children who have not reached the Year 12, but instead should be directed to their parents.
- When using a ministry Social Media account, adults must not initiate “friend” requests with children, but may accept “friend” requests from children who are involved in the particular ministry.
- When children form their own Social Media groups, adults should not join these groups.
- As a general rule, neither personal nor ministry Social Media accounts should be used to contact children individually. If children contact particular adults engaged in ministry (other than a “friend” request), the ministry account should be used to reply by sending a group message (i.e., when the personal contact was for information relevant to all in the group). When the contact is such that a group response is not appropriate, the adult is to avoid using a personal Social Media account to respond. In those unusual cases where Social Media is used to respond, adults should maintain copies of all such messages.
- On line “chatting” with children is not permitted.

Enforcement

The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province intends to enforce the policy set forth here and expect all confreers to comply.

The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province reserve the right to make changes to this policy at any time and at its sole discretion, and interpret and administer the policy in light of changing circumstances and events.

The Congregation of the Mission – Oceania Province gratefully acknowledge the sources for the development of this Social Media Policy: the Archdiocese of Dallas (USA), the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops and the Archdiocese of Cincinnati (USA).