



Social media is helping foster thousands of real-life relationships between lay people and those in religious life.

## Social media, an invitation rooted in the gospel

**W**HY SOCIAL MEDIA? The invitations to social media are all around us. Just a few examples:

- communications coworkers ask you for material to post online,
- family members ask if you've seen the latest grandniece or grandnephew picture on Facebook,
- friends e-mail invitations to one social network or another,
- committee colleagues request meetings by video conference,
- discerners send you text messages.

All of these invitations, as well as perhaps our own questions about social media, are placing new demands on those of us in religious life and offering powerful opportunities for relationship.

Experience and research affirm that having an online presence is important for promoting religious life and attracting new members. Social media in particular is a significant way to use the Internet to foster relationships—not virtual relationships, but ones that are indeed flesh and blood.

More and more people interested in religious life are learning about

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our congregations online and using social media and technology as a way to stay in touch with us—and we with them. Social media gives us the opportunity to develop a better understanding of who discerners and newer members are, whom and what they care about, and how they see the world.

For as much potential as social media holds, we may still experience hesitation personally and within our congregations about exploring social media.

## Entering into a different culture

That hesitation may arise from a culture clash. It's important to recognize the complexity of entering into what is essentially a different culture. Consider all of our women and men who have been on mission in far-off places or even in local neighborhoods. Not only have they learned the language, but they have also immersed themselves in the culture, lived among the people, and found their own spirituality growing in new ways. In mission, religious have opened themselves to be transformed so that they might be more in tune with the people with whom they live and serve. They have acculturated.

Social media has its own culture as well. It has its own languages, customs, symbols, and patterns of interaction. This is true of social media as a whole, as well as for each social network in particular. While digital devices are needed to enter into that culture, they afford the possibility of entering into a world of relationship, conversation, and community. As impersonal as hardware, software, and data packets may seem in themselves, they are great helpers in giving us another way to connect with people in deep and meaningful ways.

## Encountering and naming the challenges

The potential for relationship via social media is great, but the challenges can still seem daunting. At A Nun's Life Ministry, we have worked for over nine years in social media. We've walked with many women and men who are discerning, some of whom who have found their home in religious life. We have encountered both the joys and the challenges of immersing ourselves in the culture of social media. In the work we do with religious congregations we see both attraction to the opportunities of social media, as well as concern for many of the same challenges that we face. We have found it helpful to name those concerns and place them in the context of our spiritual tradition. Doing so frees up our energy to move ahead.

Here are a few of the social media concerns that we have encountered.

- It's not real—The online world is just a bunch of techno-gizmos, algorithms, and fake personas that can't possibly communicate authentic human interaction. It's "virtual," not real.
- It's dangerous—Social media is used for cyberbullying, pornography, and other activities that do violence to people.
- It's too time-consuming—With an overflowing schedule already, why invest precious time and energy in something that is so random, unpredictable, and trivial at best?
- It's a fad—Just because all the kids are doing it doesn't mean I should. Selfies, cat videos, and incoherent acronyms—how meaningful is that!?
- It's too difficult—I have no idea where to begin or even how to use this stuff. Plus my phone is anything but smart.
- It's unbecoming—What would people think of me, a religious, playing around with this stuff when I could be ministering instead?

There are many other issues and concerns around the use of social media. Given that, why bother with it?

## What would Jesus do?

How can we engage these challenges drawing on our spiritual tradition? Jesus gives us a powerful model for moving forward in ministry in the face of the challenges and difficulties. In many stories in scripture, we see in Jesus not moving away from but moving into things that are challenging. We see in Jesus a quiet and at times boisterous confidence that he can handle the circumstances of what it means to be in the mix of the crowd.

One of my favorite stories reflecting the more boisterous, less quiet side of Jesus is the "Cleansing of the Temple." Imagine for a moment Jesus making his way through a crowded Jerusalem with thousands of pilgrims preparing for Passover. He heads over to the temple only to find it teeming with money changers and animals for sale. "You have turned this house of prayer into a den of thieves!" (Matthew 21:12).

What would have happened if Jesus decided not to bother with going into the temple because of the flagrant misuse of the temple by a few people? What if he decided

that it was too dangerous or too difficult to deal with? Thankfully Jesus did not make that choice. Instead Jesus went into the mix, addressed those who had created the problem, and made a change for the better. Similarly we are invited to consider the possibility of entering into the mix and looking for and adding to the good that is already there. Our engagement with social media might also be an opportunity to overturn a few tables.

## Turn the tables upside down

What are some of the tables that can be overturned? Let's start with ourselves. It is helpful to address why we are so cautious and possibly even resistant to using social media. These are worth exploring because once we have a better idea of what is giving us pause, we can turn it around and perhaps see more clearly our next steps. Even small steps are great strides forward, especially when all it takes to connect with someone is literally the click of a button! For example we may hesitate to use social media because we are unsure of what to say and don't want to make mistakes. To turn this around, there are a few things we can do. Acknowledging that we feel this way is a great first step. We are then free to try something new. We could practice on social media with people whom we trust such as nieces and nephews or colleagues in religious life. We could take a workshop in social media to build confidence and skill. In thinking about concerns, try turning the table and finding a new way to look at them.

## Bearing witness online

Now let's look at the world of social media itself. Yes, the online world can be a tough place, just as the offline world can be. For example bullying is a problem in cyberspace, just as it is on school campuses. Does that mean we should not be present on school campuses?

As religious and people engaged in ministry, we know what it's like to walk into difficult situations where there is pain and violence, where the struggles of the human condition are writ large. Why would social media be any exception to this? In social media we have the opportunity to overturn tables quietly with our very presence or by calling out injustice boisterously when we see it. We must also remember that the money changers weren't the only people in the temple that day. There were people who went to the temple to pray, to make an offering, to be instructed in their faith, to hear scripture proclaimed, and to engage in other temple services.

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of Catholic sisters and  
the people they serve.**



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Similarly, the online crowd consists of a wide variety of people. We can turn over a few tables here, too.

- For people who are vulnerable, we can provide safe haven.
- For people lacking resources, we can make connections.
- For people longing for meaningful interaction, we can be with them.
- For people surfing aimlessly, we can give them something beautiful to stumble upon.
- For people who are more comfortable behind avatars, we can accept them as they are.
- For people wondering what they should do with their life, we can be mentors.

Some in the crowd may be friends, and many will be strangers. Some will need to be ministered to, some will minister to us. But undoubtedly in this same crowd will

be women and men who will become the next generation of religious sisters and brothers.

## Entering into the mix

The next step, of course, is to enter in, however small or tentatively or boldly, trusting that it is God who will bring all our efforts to good—a first attempt at Twitter, a training session on blogging, a discussion with our IT team. Once again we return to Jesus as a model and source of encouragement in the following story which originally appeared on [anunslife.org](http://anunslife.org).

A STORY BASED ON THE GREAT CATCH—One day Jesus was scrolling through a news feed on his iPad, and the cares and concerns of so many people pressed in on him, people who needed a word of hope, a word of encouragement. Two notifications popped up from social media platforms he frequented—Facebook and Twitter. Jesus logged on to Twitter to tweet short, quick messages to show he was present and cared.

Jesus continued to send messages to the online crowds. When he had finished tweeting, he sent a private message to some of his Twitter followers who happened to be online at the moment, “Launch out deeper into the online world and cast your nets to the many who are out there.” They answered, “Rabbi, we’ve been on our computers all night and there’s no one out there; but if you say so, we’ll try uploading some pictures to Pinterest and see who is on Facebook.”

Upon doing so, they encountered so many responses that the batteries on their devices were nearly depleted. They signaled to their mates on other social media platforms to come and help them, and together they posted new messages, replied to questions and concerns, and got to know new friends and followers.

After Jesus’ followers saw what happened, they were filled with awe and texted Jesus, saying, “Unfriend us, Rabbi, for we are not worthy. We fell short.” For they were astonished at the crowds who were eager for meaningful connection online.

Jesus said to his followers, “Don’t be afraid; from now on you’ll be Facebooking, tweeting, and finding many ways to connect with people.” When they plugged their devices in to recharge, they left their fears behind and followed Jesus. ■