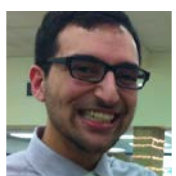


ECHOES OF CHURCH LIFE

BY ISAAC GARCIA

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Isaac Garcia is the Marketing Manager for the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, where he oversees social media and other online communications and marketing efforts.

“Hi, I’m Isaac, I tweet for nuns.”

My tongue-in-cheek introduction is good for a few cheap laughs, but it’s true. Hiding behind an avatar of a partially cropped maroon cross, I tweet like a Sister of Mercy, walking in the world of social media.

And walking is an intentional word. The Sisters of Mercy were founded in 1831 by Catherine McAuley in Dublin, Ireland, with a charism to educate and care for the poor and sick women and children on the streets of Dublin. Unlike some religious congregations, the ‘Mercys’ have always been out in the community, walking in communities to find and minister with people who need love and support. The Sisters’ intentional social media presence is no accident—it’s rooted in their very foundation.

My story of “walking with” people online is quite similar. I grew up with and on the Internet. The ability to be social online is not new, but it has recently shifted from private, targeted communications to public and open interactions. In high school, my friend Barry and I chatted on AOL Instant Messenger about our Catholic faith. Now he’s a priest and I’m involved in Catholic communications. Our lives, our vocations, bear witness to the potential depth of digital interactions. Hidden beneath layers of snark, harmful comments, and cat memes lies a powerful way to connect people and build authentic relationships and community.

Despite what your newsfeed might look like, the brilliance of social media is not that it allows companies and organizations a new advertising platform. Social media is much more, says Avanish Kaushik, the Digital Marketing Evangelist for Google (yes, that’s his real job title): “Social Media is not an advertising platform. It is a platform to nurture and deepen relationships. The question is: Do you know how to do relationships?”

Social media isn’t about posting a link to our latest blog, sharing black and white photos of Sisters in black and white habits, or even trying to get a seat at the Catholic big kids table to participate in online conversations. These are incidental to our main goal of forming authentic relationships. I’ve lost count of the number of times I’ve connected our social audiences to a particular sister, a ministry, or our vocation minister. While we have a number of amazing news stories, the best part of social media is forging ever-deeper relationships with our audience. We’re not focused on leveraging relationships to meet some sort of goal, but on inviting people into healthy relationships with God, the Sisters, and their fellow Mercy followers.

What’s important is that our social presence is authentic to Mercy—communicating Mercy’s charism and spirituality. My approach to forming our audience takes its

cues from St. Augustine’s way of handing on the faith. Preachers must speak in ways to move the listener to belief and action, which requires something more than “[stumbling] along slow, cold and half asleep.”¹ Why should those “who utter their lies [do so] briefly, clearly, [and] plausibly, and those [who] should state their truths [do so] in a manner too boring to listen to, too obscure to understand, and finally too repellent to believe?”² All too often, social media posts from Catholic organizations epitomize the formulaic, the bland, and the tired. While I slip into that comfortable, safe zone from time to time, I push myself to be creative and clear. The Sisters of Mercy are a vibrant, rambunctious group and their social media posts must match their characteristics.

But it hasn’t always been easy. When I started tweeting for nuns, character limits and “best practices” intimidated me. 140 characters seemed like a creativity-stifling straightjacket. But I’ve come to see the 140-character limit as freeing. Brevity and clarity win the day on Twitter, something I learned by following top tweeters. There’s no need for hyper-specialized training to write good social media posts and follow-up replies. St. Augustine also provides some wisdom here. He advocates for teachers to “read or listen to eloquent speakers and to practice imitating them,” rather than learning the rules or rhetoric.³ Social media “best practices” guides are important starting points, but the best way to learn is to watch and read the best of what’s out there, Catholic or otherwise.

The Sisters of Mercy have several key audiences on social media and post content depends specifically on whom we’re targeting. As I type out posts at work, I’m frequently reminded of a St. Ignatius of Loyola quote: “Enter through their door but be sure to leave through your door.” There needs to be a hook, an emotional appeal tailor-made for today’s audience. For vocations, we focus on community, prayer, and service. For justice advocates, we’ve found quotes quite helpful. Our spirituality seekers like a prayer or Scripture quote with a photo. The door for each of these groups is different and so our approach is as well.

The Sisters of Mercy’s charism is expressed in five distinct areas called the Critical Concerns: immigration, earth, women, racism, and nonviolence.

As these concerns shape the Sisters’ ministry and lives, they also shape their social media. But there’s a challenge: talking about addressing systemic problems. In inviting people to join in advocacy efforts for people who are poor, I often read suggestions for sisters to “go back to the convent,” or “stop meddling in politics.” These sorts of comments echo a sentiment Pope Francis expressed in an address to the World Meeting of Popular Movements: “It is strange, but if I speak about this, some will

think that the pope is communist.” While it might be easier to ignore these difficult and potentially divisive subjects on social media, I must keep the Sisters’ social audience online true to their charism.

Not all challenges are so clear-cut. Several times a week, I spend a few minutes looking at the social profiles of our newest Facebook and Twitter followers to get a sense of who’s interested. My heart breaks when I see yet another person’s timeline filled with “Keep Calm” memes, angry, divisive postings, and/or provocative selfies. This is our audience: an audience both jockeying for attention and crying out for meaningful relationships.

Over and over in the Gospels Jesus speaks to large crowds. After he finishes speaking, a few people find him and have personal conversation where they dig deeper into Jesus’ teachings. These few people who come up to him are usually feeling angry, needing help, or seeking answers. Learning how and when to respond to hotheads and seekers of support and wholeness on social media can be the difference between creating and enriching relationships, and shouting at one another.

In his encyclical on the Church’s missionary mandate, Pope St. John Paul II writes, “The means of social communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large” (*Redemptoris Missio*, §37). These prophetic words are just as fresh today as they were when written in 1990. For better and for worse, social media is omnipresent for today’s Americans. Facebook and Twitter ushered in a new era of interacting with one another. While the methods and means we use to communicate socially will continue to change, one thing certain: social media cannot be ignored.



NOTES

1 Augustine of Hippo, *De Doctrina Christiana*, trans. Edmund Hill, O.P. (New York: New City Press, 1996), Book IV, 3.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., Book IV, 8.