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## **Social Media Policy**

### **Preamble**

Social media is a relatively recent development in the world of communications. Still, it has grown and expanded very rapidly and has been integrated into the daily life of many people. Consequently, as the Holy Father points out, it is a fertile ground for ministry because it extends beyond the reach of traditional means of communication and human interaction. It is for this reason that the Church encourages responsible and effective use of social media.

### **Purpose**

St. Thomas Syro Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago recognizes that social media is being used in various methods as a popular tool to promote evangelization and education. However, those using the internet should bear in mind that content shared through social media may have a harmful effect on parishes and missions of the diocese as well as its employees and volunteers. In light of this possibility, employees and volunteers must adhere to the following policy regarding the use of social media sites, networks, and blogs.

This Social Media Policy applies to all computer and mobile-based tools utilized for sharing content and discussing information, whether controlled by the diocese, local parish/mission or hosted on other platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, LinkedIn, etc.), on which employees and volunteers of the parishes and missions engage in activities relating to the church or diocese. The term "social media" refers to activities that integrate technology, communications, and social interaction through the use of words, images, video, and audio. Examples include, but are not limited to, social websites, blogs, message boards, wikis, podcasts, image/video sharing sites, live webcasting, and real-time communications. Because this is a continually evolving area, this policy applies to all new social media platforms, whether they are specifically mentioned in this policy.

### **General Procedural Guidelines**

**1. Be selective** – due to the availability of a variety of digital tools, be careful in the type of medium for your message – a blog or social network might not be the right place for messages intended only for a small group. Ministry personnel should create separate social media pages or profiles for personal and professional use. Appropriate professional boundaries must be maintained. Therefore, personal information, pages, or profiles, should not be accessible to the general public, especially

when minors are involved. However, it should be noted that nothing posted on the internet is ever truly 'private'. Ministry personnel using social media should be aware that they represent the Catholic Church to the larger public community both in their professional capacity and personal capacity if they have identified themselves as such. Due to this connection, ministry personnel should not engage in activity that would reflect poorly upon the Church and could cause scandal. The unacceptable activities include but is not limited to mention of inappropriate use of alcohol, advocacy of inappropriate music and movies, inappropriate language, inappropriate dress, inappropriate images, or the expression and advocacy of opinions that are contrary to the doctrinal and moral teachings and mission of the Catholic Church as articulated by the Magisterium and the official positions of the diocese.

**2. Be responsible** – All employees and volunteers at the parish/mission are personally accountable for their posts. Official statements of policy may only be made by parish priest or designee. Remember that what you write will be public, and potentially for a long time. In the event you identify yourself as (or is manifestly understood to be) an employee of the local parish or diocese on a personal blog or another website with a similar purpose, the employee is required to put the following notice in a reasonably prominent place on the site:

*"The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer, or the Diocese of St. Thomas Syro Malabar, Chicago."*

**3. Identify yourself** – authenticity and transparency are driving forces behind social media. Use real identities to the greatest extent possible rather than anonymous posts and comments. Moderators and ministry personnel should be familiar with the terms of use, age restrictions, privacy settings, and controls of a social media site when they establish a presence in that network.

**4. Honor the privacy of others** – do not publish others' personal information without their permission or, in the case of minors, written permission of their parents.

**5. Be respectful** – if you disagree with others, do so with civility. Respect your audience, express your views with appropriate language, and be respectful of the church and its teachings.

**6. Comply to** – all guidelines of Safe Environment Policy<sup>[1]</sup> of St. Thomas Syro Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago.

**7. Establishing a Site** – Websites and social networking profile pages are the centerpieces of any social media activity. Employees and volunteers of the diocese and parishes/missions are advised to follow the guidelines below while setting up and maintaining an internet entity (referred to as 'site' below) on behalf of the diocese or parish/mission.

1. Site administrators shall be adults.

2. There shall be at least two site administrators (preferably more) for each site to allow rapid response and continuous monitoring of the website.
3. Do not use personal sites for diocesan or parish programs. Create separate sites for these.
4. Abide by diocesan/parish guidelines.
5. Know that even personal communication by church personnel reflects the Church. Practice what you preach.
6. Write in the first person. Do not claim to represent the official position of the diocese/parish/mission, or the teachings of the Church, unless authorized to do so.
7. Identify yourself. Do not use pseudonyms or the name of the parish, program, etc., as your identity unless authorized to do so.
8. Do not divulge confidential information about others. Nothing posted on the internet is private.
9. Do not cite others, post photos or videos of them, link to their material, etc., without their approval.

## **Specific Policies**

### **Use of official name and logo**

Any use of the parish/mission name or logo for branding or titling pages, blogs, or other similar elements of social media must be approved in writing in advance. Requests for consent to use such names or logos shall be made to the Pastor or designee. Any use in existence at the time of adopting this policy is not grandfathered and would be unauthorized according to this policy. Permission to use the name or logo of the parish or mission may be revoked at any time.

### **Duties of moderators**

Diocese and its parishes/missions shall designate employees/volunteers as official moderators for internet properties, including websites and social media pages. Moderators are responsible for ensuring compliance with this policy. All content, including comments and blog responses, must be moderated. Moderators shall actively review and approve content before posting and shall not post any content that does not meet standards for civility, that misrepresent the position of the Church or diocese/parish/mission, or that include profanity, defamatory language, or speech that is otherwise inappropriate or off-topic. Anonymous comments shall not be permitted. All moderation functions reserve the right to ban repeat offenders. Moderators who permit users to post materials such as documents and photographs shall inform users that the site will not archive those materials.

### **Personal use – possible negative impact**

Even when engaging in social media for personal use, the content contributed by employees or volunteers of the diocese/parish/mission may be attributed to the office they represent. Employees and volunteers shall use their best judgment while engaging in social media activities and should

be on guard against actions and discussions that could adversely affect the interests of the diocese/parish/mission or be interpreted as inappropriate by diocese/parish/mission administration and general public.

### **Contact with students**

Employees and volunteers of the diocese/parish/mission shall not engage with current and prospective students who are under 18 on social media sites unless it is approved by the administration. Caution and prudence must be used while communicating with students who are 18 and above.

### **Copyright laws**

Content published to official parish/mission social media must adhere to all applicable copyright laws. Images and other materials from the parish or mission websites shall not be copied and uploaded to other sites without the prior written consent of the parish priest or designee.

### **Privacy**

Employees and volunteers of diocese/parish/mission shall safeguard the privacy interests of community members while publishing content on social media. In particular, personally identifiable information (that is, information that can identify a specific person, including, but not limited to, name, photo, phone number, address, email address, etc.) shall not be disclosed without the prior written consent of the person identified. In cases where a user has consented to the publication of such information, appropriate privacy settings and levels shall be utilized.

### **Social networking with minors**

Public social media maintained by the diocese/parish/mission are not intended for the use of children under the age of 13. Any site operated by parish/mission oriented toward youth between the ages of 13 and 18 must require registration for all users and must be password protected so that only registered users may access the site. Users of such a website shall not post images of minors without the prior written consent of a parent or legal guardian of any minor depicted.

Employees and volunteers of diocese/parish/mission shall acquire and document permission from a minor's parent or guardian before contacting the minor via social media or posting pictures, videos, and other information that may identify the minor.

Parents must have access to everything provided to their children. For example, parents must be made aware of how social media are being used, be told how to access the sites, and be allowed to be copied on all material sent to their children via social networking (including text messages). While parents should be provided with the same material as their children, it does not have to be via the same technology; if children receive a reminder via text message, parents can receive it in a printed form or by email.

Make everyone aware of the [Children's Online Privacy Protection Act](#), which is federal legislation

that oversees how websites interact with children under age 13.

### **Enforcement**

Any use of social media that does not comply with this policy should be brought to the attention of the appropriate party: the Pastor or designee immediately. Failure to follow the social media policy may result in the loss of privileges or disciplinary action, up to and including termination, for an employee or removal from position if a volunteer.

### **Social networking website passwords**

Students and their parents or guardians are advised that the St. Thomas Syro Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago will not request or require a student to provide a password or other related account information to gain access to the student's account profile on a social networking website.

*This policy may be updated and modified at any time at the sole discretion of St. Thomas Syro Malabar Catholic Diocese of Chicago Office, Office for the Protection of Children and Youth, in light of changing circumstances and events. The latest version of this policy is available from <URL>.*

### **References**

[1] Safe Environment Policy of St. Thomas Syro Malabar Diocese of Chicago (<https://stthomasdiocese.org/child-safety>)