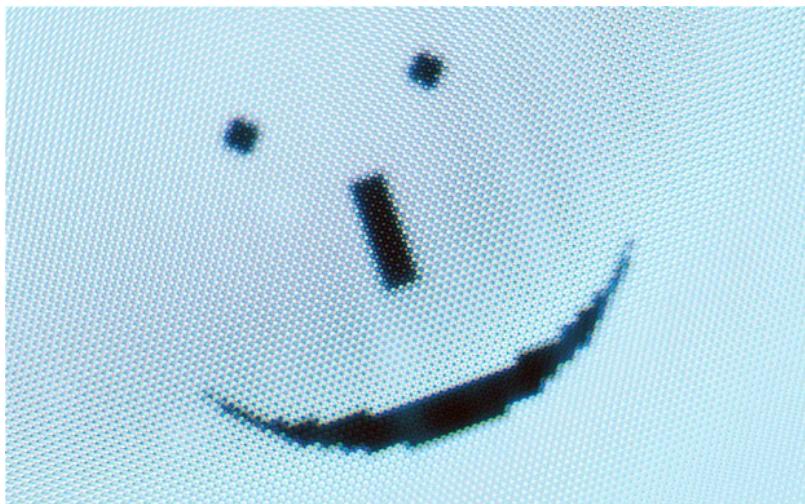


The Roman Catholic Church has issued advice to its followers on how to use the internet

Let there be light: Catholic Church gives blessing to digital smiley face

Roman Catholics instructed to use “digital smiles” in text messages, emails, tweets and Facebook postings to spread the “joy of the gospel” online



It might seem far removed from some of its more sombre instructions to the faithful over the centuries.

But the Roman Catholic Church has issued advice to its followers on how to use the internet – and given an unlikely stamp of ecclesiastical approval to the use of the humble smiley face.

In a new 10 Commandments for the internet age, Catholics are being urged to make use of “digital smiles” in postings on Twitter and Facebook as well as emails and text messages.

The guidelines follow a call from Pope Francis for Catholics to take the church’s message out “into digital highways”.

In an echo of the original 10 Commandments, the instructions warn the faithful never to “bear false witness on the internet”.

But there are also injunctions against “preachiness” in online postings or being judgmental towards others in messages in internet forums or social networking sites.

The guidance is outlined in a message by one of the most senior Catholic clerics in the British Isles, Archbishop Eamon Martin, the incoming Archbishop of Armagh and future Primate of All Ireland.

In a reflection about the rise of modern communications, the Archbishop likens the internet to St Paul’s impressions of first century Athens in which people appeared to do “nothing but talking about and listening to the latest ideas”.

“I see the internet as being like the ‘new Athens’, new marketplace or Areopagus, a ‘global village’ to be won for Christ,” he said.

“Our challenge is to become witnesses for Christ in this strange new world, to enter into dialogue with the digital culture.”

“If only to be able to reach our young people and an increasing percentage of people of all ages, we need to be present in this new Areopagus.

“Our young people are spending huge proportions of their time in this virtual world, so much that for many it is becoming increasingly the place where they live their lives, and what we call the real world of face to face seems often dull uneventful to them, and their secondary existence.

“Never cease to be amazed at the ability of young people to text, snapchat, Facebook with others all while talking to you.”

But he warned Catholics against “simply bombarding people with religious messages” on internet before setting out 10 rules to guide the church to use the internet to reach “the ends of the earth”.

First on the list he urged them, to be “positive and joyful”, adding: “Offer ‘digital smiles’ and have a sense of humour.

“Remember that it is the ‘joy of the Gospel’ that we are communicating, so, as Pope Francis says: no ‘funeral faces’ or ‘sourpusses’.”

Other advice includes to take online insults and criticism in good heart and to find a way to “pray” and meditate online.

The Archbishop’s digital 10 Commandments:

- 1: Be positive and joyful. Offer ‘digital smiles’ and have a sense of humour.
2. Strictly avoid aggression and ‘preachiness’ online; try not to be judgmental or polemical.
3. Never bear false witness on the internet.
4. Fill the internet with charity and love, always giving rather than taking.
5. Have a broad back when criticisms and insults are made – when possible, gently correct.
6. Pray in the digital world. Establish sacred spaces, opportunities for stillness, reflection and meditation.
7. Establish connections, relationships and build communion.
8. Educate our young to keep themselves safe and to use the internet responsibly.

9. Witness to human dignity at all times online. We are well aware of the pervasive prevalence of pornography on the internet which can 'pollute the spirit'.

10. Be missionary, be aware that with the help of the internet, a message has the potential to reach the ends of the earth in seconds.

John Bingham - The Telegraph