

## Come follow me: On faith and Facebook

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Less than a decade ago, *social* and *media* wouldn't have been seen together in public. Now, the two are not only hopelessly enamored with one another, but, as a couple, are proving to be a transformative, irreversible cultural force—for better or worse.

The pairing hasn't been completely blissful. As noted in a January 2011 article in *The Washington Post*, some therapists have begun prescribing “tech cleanses” for clients whose lives have been negatively impacted by social networking and other technology.

Nevertheless, many Catholics—including parents, kids, and clergy—find that social media has become an essential component of their faith lives, and they're willing to put up with the pitfalls to utilize the positives.

Paul Escandon ([@newaustinite](#)) is one who shudders to consider his life without social media. “To be absolutely honest, without social media my family would not even be in existence,” says the 29-year-old Catholic father of three from Austin, Texas. “I met (my wife) Rachael on MySpace in 2004 when we were living thousands of miles away from each other. We hit it off online and were engaged 13 months later. Because of this, social websites have a very special place in my heart.”

As Escandon touts the virtues of the digital age, some may wince to think a real relationship can be forged through what seems an impersonal mode of connecting.

But Escandon needs only to experience the delightful, after-work welcome of his wife and daughters—Clare, 4, Lucy, 2, and Marianne, 10 months—to prove that while the Internet may seem cold, its potential for fostering warm relationships is real.

A social media analyst by day, Escandon says though it's impossible to predict just where the rapidly-growing phenomenon of social media is heading, he believes we'll reach a point at which lack of social media use will be likened to not knowing how to drive a car; a few die-hards will resist, but as the rare exception.

## Everybody's doing it

The extent to which we are influenced by online use these days is easily evidenced. Libby Hall ([@libbyjuju](#)), digital strategist for Flint Communications in Fargo, North Dakota, notes that one third of women 18 to 34 check Facebook first thing in the morning—even before using the bathroom. “If that’s not ‘being absorbed into the typical American’s life,’ I don’t know what is.”

Even if they don’t fall into the age group of those who prefer getting a taste of Facebook before their morning coffee, older mothers and grandmothers are spending plenty of time engaging in social media. According to [Insidefacebook.com](#) women over 55 comprise one of the fastest-growing demographics on the site.

The December/January issue of *Time* magazine, which named Facebook’s young founder Mark Zuckerberg 2010 Person of the Year, noted that the social-networking giant reached 550 million members late last year, and is expected to grow to a billion by 2012.

For those hoping social media is simply a fad, evidence suggests otherwise, including within the life of the modern Catholic family.

Barbara Hofer, co-author of *The iConnected Parent* (Free Press, 2010), says many families are staying in better contact with college-age and older children thanks to technology. Skype and the iPhone’s video application, FaceTime, can allow grandparents to strengthen bonds with young grandchildren who live far away. “I met a grandfather who bought his 9-year-old an iPad,” she says, “and they now download and read the same books on their respective iPads and discuss them, using interactive features to deepen their background knowledge together.”

Even Pope Benedict XVI gives credence to God’s ability to traverse all corners of the globe, those of the Internet included. At 84, the pope has been a strong proponent of encouraging the faithful to embrace the Digital Age.

He has addressed digital media in his message for World Communications Day since 2009. “It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this ‘digital continent.’ Be sure to announce the gospel to your contemporaries with enthusiasm,” he said.

## Media evolution

Lisa Hendey’s ([@LisaHendey](#)) dip into cyberspace came just as things were revving up online. In 1999 the 47-year-old mother from Fresno, California was looking for ways to help teach her sons more about the Catholic faith in preparation for first communion. When the position of volunteer webmaster at their Catholic grade school became available, she grabbed the opportunity, as well as some school-initiated, basic instruction on HTML coding.

With her newfound knowledge in hand, Hendey started her own website to connect with other Catholic parents, naming it [CatholicMom.com](#), and she began offering what other websites at the time did: a place for people to glean information, but not necessarily interact. “For the first three or four years, it

was really just a hobby,” she says. “I’d work on it before the kids woke up and while they were at school.”

In 2004 she decided to give blogging a try, and soon thereafter, the website became much more interactive, with people leaving comments regularly. Eventually, the site began featuring podcasts and videos, and more recently, Facebook and Twitter connections that allow for an even wider variety of exchanges.

Hendey sees social media as the convergence of traditional media and community outreach. It can touch everyone from family members to others reached through any variety of social medial platforms. “Some people, when they hear “social media,” think Facebook and that’s it, but I think there’s a lot more out there, and really the way traditional media is now presenting itself.???. They’re no longer just reporting the news at us, they’re inviting us to be part of the conversation.”

These days it’s second nature for Hendey to head to the Internet when looking for information. “One of my instant reactions is to go to Twitter to find out what’s happening on the front line,” she says. “Of course ... [it] isn’t always 100 percent accurate, but it’s interesting to me how now, when there’s an earthquake in Haiti or a flood in Queensland, Australia, you don’t just get the official take but can hear from people who are right in the middle of it.”

### **Child’s play**

But with the wonderful connecting avenues has come a new and urgent role for parents to train their children to use online resources healthily. In the Hendey household, having a Facebook account isn’t a given.

“It’s a rite of passage, something you earn,” she says, adding that parents have the responsibility to keep tabs on their kids’ online activity, securing account information and passwords. “Teaching them that they’re essentially building an online resume for themselves is as much a daily part of my parenting as fixing their meals and washing their clothes.”

The necessity for parents to guide and monitor their children’s use of technology, with all of its gadgets, devices, and media platforms, didn’t exist pre-Internet and poses new challenges.

“‘Parenting online’ is perhaps a misnomer, but parenting in the age when so many of us ‘live’ online has new complexities,” Hendey says. Understanding the ins and outs of using each tool—like understanding and monitoring privacy settings on Facebook—and setting age-appropriate time limits and boundaries are part of what is required. Helping children understand appropriate communication skills in these arenas is another.

“One of the benefits of sharing these tools with our children is increased communication about the things that matter to them in their lives,” Hendey says. “They may express passions, concerns, fears, or

hopes on their Facebook wall or in a YouTube video that they may not tell a parent verbally.”

With her oldest son in college, Hendey says she’s been using online connections like Facebook, Skype, and Apple’s FaceTime to stay in touch, and news gleaned online to initiate conversations. Learning online of a college-based suicide, she saw a “teachable moment” and initiated a phone conversation with her son about bullying.

Hendey considers social networking and technology a blessing for keeping the family connected over distance, like when her son traveled to Florida on a community service trip with his parish. “We were able to see the photos his pastor posted online, follow his travels on Facebook, and have a better sense of the experience he had on the trip thanks to his online sharing.”

Hendey says the pope’s call for respect, dialogue, and friendship helps her to guide her own online activity. “I think if you can remember those three things—whether it’s your family you’re communicating with or your family on Facebook—that can keep you on track.”

### **Express yourself**

Marc Barnes, 17, is trying to keep such wisdom in mind, though he admits he’s still a work in progress when it comes to his online presence. Barnes began blogging last summer because he wanted a place to put his writings. As he gained readers, he became energized. “Once people start following your blog, it starts to shape your writing. Suddenly you have a purpose. You’re not just speaking to empty space. It inspires you to write directly and purposefully,” he says.

Even his blog name, Bad Catholic ([badcatholicblog.blogspot.com](http://badcatholicblog.blogspot.com)), was intentional, though he appreciates the chance to expound: “Over the course of a couple posts, I realized I wanted to focus on the fact that Catholicism, well, we’re bad at it, we’re fallen. I wanted to focus on that idea that we strive and we fail and that’s OK. It’s a great mystery within our faith and I love that, so it became sort of a theme.”

He says it’s his little brother who holds him accountable. “I don’t want to be offensive or misleading when I know that he looks up to me, and I might influence him.”

Barnes, Hendey, and others show that the binding of families through social media is often less intentional and more a natural effect of the tools being used to move through and enhance everyday life.

“Like everything else, blogging is a tool that can be used for good or bad,” Barnes says. And though he aspires toward more mature, enduring writing in time, right now he’s simply out to help evangelize his generation. “God isn’t limited. He’ll work through whatever means he can.”

Rebekah Scaperlanda, 24, views blogging as an important way to both grow in her faith and reach the faithful of her generation. She’s a blogger for Goodness Reigns ([goodnessreigns.com](http://goodnessreigns.com)), which has encouraged her to look at life from a new perspective and share that with readers who might be looking for spiritual encouragement.

“I hope that by sharing my experiences, my weaknesses, my yearning to live life the way God is calling us to, I can encourage others to do the same,” she says. “As a young adult, this is a time in my life where there’s a lot of [listening for] God’s call, and a blog is a perfect outlet to share in this with others who may be experiencing the same things.”

She often relies on faith experiences within family life. Last year she wrote about her family’s Holy Week traditions. “Sharing these experiences has led to greater understandings of the workings of my family and has invited my extended family to share in those traditions with us this year for Easter,” she says.

Scaperlanda also admits to being “a little obsessed” with Facebook, which she uses daily to connect with friends and family living in different states. “My parents are very involved in their virtual updates, and it allows me to have a better insight into their everyday lives, rather than just hearing the major updates when we catch up on the phone,” she says.

She also loves connecting with extended family she likely wouldn’t be in close touch with otherwise. “When I saw my cousin at a family reunion, we were able to jump into much deeper conversations about our lives since we skipped the initial updates we’ve caught on Facebook,” she says.

### **Tweeting prayers**

Sometimes, online connections are about more than just keeping in touch, and have the potential to be life-giving.

Carrie Swearingen, a Catholic journalist and mother of two young children, knows well how God works online. Currently fighting a third round of cancer—a stage four, metastatic breast cancer—Swearingen says reforging connections through [lotsahelpinghands.com](https://lotsahelpinghands.com) has been helpful for coordinating schedules of neighbors and friends wanting to help with meals and childcare.

The method also respects the need for privacy, enabling what Swearingen calls the ability to “manage the love” within the constraints of one dealing with illness. And for those with relatives overseas as she has, it respects differing time zones as well.

But beyond the immediate, tangible help, Swearingen says summoning prayers with the click of a button has been edifying. “It gives comfort to anyone who is sick that within moments, there are literally thousands of people praying for you,” she says. “It’s an amazing feeling knowing I have orphans in Tanzania who are praying for me, that there are astronomers at the Vatican praying for me, and prayer groups in Ireland as well.”

And if that isn’t enough to convince naysayers of technology’s great potential to make a positive difference in the world, even among the faithful, perhaps nothing will.



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