# **Facebook and Parish Awareness**

## Look Open, Welcoming and Serious

A parish social media presence can help to keep the life of the parish in the minds of active parishioners, serve as a non-confrontational communication link to parishioners in a state of post-Covid dormancy, build awareness of Orthodox Christianity and present a warm welcome to your parish to those seeking a new church home.

Since we've noticed many parishes in the early stages of social media presence, we polled our crack team of Parish Pulse advisors to share a few tips and insights. One consistent input is that social media does not work 'parish engagement' miracles. "It's not a panacea", said one advisor. Nonetheless they all agree a social media effort should be part of a planned effort to improve parish external and internal communication.

### Start with One

The first recommendation is that while there are many social media platforms – Instagram, Twitter etc. -- pick one to start out. Facebook is probably most familiar to your communications team (or you... if you're the team!) and despite competitive headwinds <u>still has almost 2x the number of users vs</u> <u>Instagram</u>. And, despite opinions to the contrary, not all Facebook users are senior citizens!

FB is a reasonable place to start. Once mastered determine how to best use a spectrum of platforms.

#### **Good Practices**

Here are some additional suggested good practices to guide your FB efforts:

- When starting out follow other good FB parish efforts to see what they do. (One of our favorites is <u>St. Athanasius Church in</u> <u>Nicholasville KY</u>.)
- The easiest way to rapidly assess the tone and style of a parish's FB use is by looking at the photos tab. What do they emphasize? To whom are they speaking? Notice people smiling?
- Always be thinking of your *call to action* for people (particularly non-parishioners landing on your page).

Our experts recommend: three 'Come and See' invitations: 1) Come and visit our website to learn more about our parish and the Orthodox Christian Faith 2) Come and



view our live-streamed services or archived services, to get a feel for our worship; 3) Come and see a service! We'd love to meet you in person!

- Make it clear the parish is about Jesus Christ. Never give the feeling this is a club, or a closed group. Limit emphasis on activities attitudes that can be found outside the church. Check your work here -- honestly this may take practice.
- Seek to convey an identity of joyful, loving, scriptural, serious, active, welcoming Christians.

- Cross pollinate with your webpage; (ref. website on FB and vice versa); same identity; often different content. On FB your content, style and tone will be less formal, more oriented to current events; occasional humor.
- Try your best to show a range of parishioner ages and activities
- Emphasize aspects of your parish that should resonate with seekers (see box "The Inquirer Audience") and that draw important contrasts with other religious traditions. However, always speak positively or not at all about others. No put downs.
- Emphasize parish ministry, neighborhood connections and educational offerings.
- This is a public page. It is not the place to review key parish issues or concerns.
- Cross post with other Orthodox parishes in your area – help make Orthodoxy NOT look tiny.
- Keep content apolitical –neither conservative nor liberal.
- Fill out the "About" and other info portions of the page. When someone lands on your FB page it should be clear you're an Orthodox Christian Church; address; general service schedule; contact info.
- Check stats of those visiting your page: who; where from? It's fun to see visitors from Thailand. But, you are particularly interested in communicating with people in your parish vicinity.

Ger	neral
, i i	3,547 people like this including 20 of your friends
	() <b>) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) ) </b>
<b>v</b>	3,684 people follow this
	Religious Organization - Eastern Orthodox Church - Religious Center
Ad	ditional contact info
⊕	http://www.athanasiusoca.org/
¢	(859) 881-8144
×	officeasst@athanasiusoca.org
0	Send message
Mo	re info
0	About
	Welcome to St. Athanasius' Official Facebook Page For more info visit www.athanasiusoca.org
0	Additional information
	St. Athanasius Orthodox Church supports the faith of people from all over the Bluegrass area, including Nicholasville and greater Lexington.

- Build a team of FB page admins to do your posts; establish a few ground rules with the priest's oversight. In general this ministry is an excellent opportunity for delegation.
- If a reader of your FB posts has practical insights/opinions about Orthodox churches, they may reflect common stereotypes. While some of these have grains (or more) of truth your communication can shape their impressions by addressing the stereotype head on. Among these labels: "Foreign", "insular", "not open to outsiders", "unfriendly", "food", "not English worship", "not scriptural", "out of touch"; "strange", "zealots", "same as Catholics" and more.

#### What to Post?

So with multiple audiences and a recommended emphasis on non-parishioner/inquirers and a few good practices, what did our advisors suggest to actually *post* on a parish FB page?

First remember --beauty is our secret weapon -- so we've emphasized graphics and photos. They connect with inquirers <u>AND</u> active/dormant parishioners. When using photos follow OCA internet guidelines. Ask permission. Recruit one or two parishioners as parish photographers (cell phone is usually fine); never show a church that looks empty during a service.

Also, remember posts can be scheduled e.g well ahead of time; use both pre-planned and spontaneous posts.

Overwhelming list? Pick a few that seem easiest and most impactful:

• "Thank you for worshiping with us today." Easy. Regular. Warm.

- **Actual Worship Photos** Link to your worship live stream or archive. If no live stream use photos. Let people get a feel before they commit to come and see.
- Class series Intro new series; post before each class; study questions please "join us tonight for...".
- **Books Reviews** -- Or links to solid books about the Orthodox faith.
- Converts with Brief Story (< 2 paragraphs) Nothing communicates "welcome" to potential inquirers like hearing a brief story about people like them who were welcomed, have embraced the Orthodox faith and joined the parish. ("You won't be alone –we have others like you.")
- *Lives of Saints*-- Not every day but rather three or four select days per month.
- *"Our Nativity worship schedule.* Join us as we celebrate the Nativity of Jesus Christ". Nothing invites like an invitation.
- Photo of Priest Not posed; greeting worshipers; welcoming; not severe; perhaps shown with family.
- *Video invitations* While more effort these have probably 4-5x greater impact.
- Photo of outside of church/ picture of sign. GPS gets them there –here is how to recognize building.
- **St. Nicholas Day** Invite; article; photos of parish celebration. (*OK, too late for this year.*)
- **Charitable Connection** -If you're posting about a fund raising project emphasize 'money raised for xyz local charity'; make sure this (continual fundraising) isn't the predominant message.
- Active Parish Ministries -- Bring these to life -more than a list. Singing for shut ins? Get snapshots. Training altar boys? Photo op.
- *Baptisms* -- Newborns; smiling parents etc.
- **Sacraments; Rites of Passage** Photos of Communion, a Chrismation, welcoming new families; goodbye to those leaving.

### **The Inquirer Audience**

One important audience for your parish social media effort is potential inquirers to Orthodoxy. Guests, inquirers and catechumens of course, come in all shapes, sizes, demographics and backgrounds.

While each is unique, parishes report a few commonalities. Some are obvious, others less so:

- **Some are dissatisfied** with their current church experience. Common comments: 'watered down', 'make it up as we go along', 'reacting to prevailing winds', and a 'cult of personality'.
- *Limited religious background* Many have had marginal religious influence in their lives yet sense "something missing-- but not clear what".
- "Seeking serious" Christianity. Many inquirers often seem to express a desire for consistent doctrine, structured liturgy, sacraments, saints as exemplars, an annual worship calendar that acknowledges more than Christmas and Easter, a source of doctrine linked to the apostolic deposit; emphasis on spiritual disciplines –prayer, fasting. Etc.
- **Questionable Orthodox Experience** -Knowledge of Orthodox teaching and practice probably came from, often extensive, internet reading. Parishes often report a need to essentially *unteach* inaccuracies.
- **Podcasts and Blogs** are often early stops on their way to Orthodoxy. Also word of mouth and invitation from relatives –who themselves are converts to Orthodoxy.
- **Political Spectrum** One priest said it best: "In my parish I've seen strong conservatives and 'Bernie democrats'. They don't seem to be in the middle."
- **Demographics** Recent inquirers seem to skew younger than your parish median. Often 60:40 male; Education varies.
- **Neighborhood social events/interaction** -- I.e. we're connected to the fabric of our place.
- *Festal Decorations* "Thanks to those who helped..." Share your beautifully adorned church.
- **Patristic Memes** Wise advice from Church Fathers, Saints. Special prayers or prayer insights.
- **Reference to Church School**. Schedule. Key class themes or projects. Small number of children? Work hard for well framed close ups; smiling teacher; a class workbook; 1-2 families walking into church with kids.