

**THE CARDINALS' FORUM**  
@ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary  
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on **“The Social Media Magisterium”:**  
**Where Popularity & Reliability Collide!**

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presentation by

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*Archbishop Pérez, Bishop Senior, Father Dailey, Dr. Haas, Dr. Knutson, and all listening: good evening!*

## **I. THE SITUATION**

The digital highways too often look like what we in Philadelphia saw last week... the Vine Street Expressway *flooded* with filthy, nasty water. Sewage was everywhere, and unknown damage was done. Too often, digital media become flooded with bad ideologies, polarization, and contempt—which reflect our deeply fractured society. These shape the online environment in which we are communicating.

It is part of what my classmate Deacon Andrew Auletta and I had the chance to look at during this program at the University of Notre Dame’s McGrath Institute: the digital environment (with all its limitations) into which we are communicating the Gospel. The fact is that Catholic media personalities and their commenting followers sometimes fall into these very same traps... and our people are watching.

Archbishop Allen Vigneron of Detroit addressed this very issue this summer in a pastoral note, entitled “*The Beauty of Truth.*” In it, he warns against the following five pitfalls observed in Catholic online circles: <sup>1</sup>

1. [propositions] out of harmony with the teachings of Christ and his Church  
*(in other words, a parallel Magisterium!)*
2. Unsubstantiated claims or allegations
3. The manipulation of facts to deceive or harm
4. *Ad hominem* attacks
5. The spirit of division

Notice that the Archbishop is not warning against strongly voiced opinions or robust debates. Instead, he speaks of things that honestly have no place in ecclesial discourse: ***bad teaching*** and ***sins against charity***.

Recently, many of us saw the vitriol aimed online at Bishop Michael Burbidge of Arlington after he issued a catechetical resource on gender, sexuality, and human dignity. We all have seen slander and mockery directed online at the Holy Father, none of which is excusable. Instead of our social communications leading to greater communion, this environment fosters calumny that leads to disunity and confusion. Would any one of us honestly direct someone considering RCIA to Catholic Twitter for a sense of the Church’s life?

## II. A PASTORAL RESPONSE

So how does a parish priest respond to this? It is a question I explored as part of this program at the McGrath Institute.

The parish priest’s job is not to censor his people’s listening choices...but rather, he is called to nourish them and lead them towards heaven. He can be a formative, clear voice in helping them grow in ***virtue***, which can inform their technological habits. We may argue that we want to listen to the truth proclaimed boldly or read online about a Church that is compassionate and accepting. More likely, though, we need to go a level deeper than this and ask ourselves:

- ❖ Is listening to these media fueling my growth in virtue—or vice?
- ❖ If I am upset with something in the life of the Church, am I just looking for an “echo chamber” to hear my emotions amplified?

There is no silver bullet, but through solid teaching and preaching, the parish priest can help us—as persons with moral agency—to examine the motivations behind our actions and to learn about the virtues after which we should seek.

### III. CONCLUSION: HOPE FOR THE DIGITAL HIGHWAYS

I’d like to close with an observation from a very wise man, who was neither a professor nor a prelate, but rather a beloved TV host: Fred Rogers. At his induction into the Television Hall of Fame, Mister Rogers remarked: *“The space between the television set and that person who’s watching is very holy ground.”*<sup>2</sup> I think he’s on to something.

The space between Catholic digital media and the student, the seeker, or the saint-in-the-making is indeed sacred. Frankly, we cannot afford to muddy this holy ground with bad teaching or malicious words. If used well, the digital highways can be avenues for someone to grow in true knowledge of Jesus Christ and the sacramental life He offers us. It even can be the fertile path in which the seeds of a conversion are planted.

We have the message of salvation. We have these media at our disposal. Here we have an opportunity to communicate the goodness, beauty, and truth of our Catholic faith well.

Thank you.

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<sup>1</sup> Archbishop Allen Vigneron, “The Beauty of Truth: A Pastoral Note on Communicating Truth and Love in the Digital Age” (11 June 2021), <https://www.unleashthegospel.org/pastoral-notes/the-beauty-of-truth/>.

<sup>2</sup> Fred Rogers, “How Do We Make Goodness Attractive?,” *Federal Communications Law Journal* 55, no. 3 (2003): 569.