

Evangelizing in a Digital World

COLLEEN JURKIEWICZ
CATHOLIC HERALD STAFF

As Christians, we're called to glorify God in every space — even online. But for many parishes, evangelizing through social media platforms is an intimidating prospect.

At a mini-breakout session of the Jan. 10 “Gigs, Geeks and God” conference at Our Lady of Lourdes Parish, Bryan Ramsey, director of youth ministry at St. James Parish, tackled the topic of evangelizing through digital media. During the 20-minute presentation, Ramsey shared some valuable tips for engaging followers and increasing interaction on parish social media pages.

But ultimately, said Ramsey, digital evangelization is deeper than just

amassing followers, and it's even deeper than simply spreading the word about one particular parish. It's about sharing Christ, and it requires the same qualities as face-to-face ministry — but it has the potential to reach those individuals who would never physically enter a church setting.

“There are times when we lay a seed for someone and try to get them engaged in something that we're doing at the parish, and they walk away and we think, that's a lost cause — but 10, 15, 20 years from then, that seed buds, and that person finds Christ,” he said. “We already do it now on a one-on-one basis. There are people who will never go into a church but are continuing to scroll through their Facebook feed, and we need to be there.”



▲ Bryan Ramsey of St. James Parish in Menomonee Falls shared 10 tips for effective digital evangelization at the Gigs, Geeks and God Conference last month.

Ramsey's 10 Tips for Effective Digital Evangelization

1. Incorporate pictures and video content. “Take a homily or a segment of the homily that you have videotaped, or a presentation,” suggested Ramsey. “Maybe you’ve taken some pictures of the third grade doing a craft — share it with a quote from one of the kids. Allow what’s already being done in your parish to move into the digital space.”

2. Start a discussion. Ramsey pointed out that many parishes and churches have great success interacting with their followers by posting one simple question: “How can we pray for you?”

3. Blog, reflect on the news and share knowledge. A favorite site of Ramsey's that has utterly shareable content is Busted Halo, he said, but

there are also plenty of free blog hosting services online where a parish or priest could write their own reflections.

4. Switch up your look. This has to do with the Facebook algorithms that determine what gets featured in the newsfeed of a page's followers. Changing a profile picture or cover photo always results in page views and interaction.

5. Time your content perfectly. Another point that has to do with Facebook algorithms — “If it doesn't get engagement quickly, it quickly gets pushed from being highlighted,” said Ramsey. There's no magic hour; it depends entirely on the audience you're trying to reach. “Watch

when people are reacting to things,” suggested Ramsey. “Experiment and see when you get the most engagement.”

6. Sharing testimony from parishioners. Whether this is mission experiences or other testimony, if you have the OK from the source, it's always powerful content.

7. Listen and respond to comments, questions and messages. “When you're in the digital world, it's not just post, post, post,” said Ramsey. “Make sure you're listening and that you're responding when people interact. You can tailor your message as you listen to people responding to what you're posting.”

8. Show what's happening in your ministries. “Utilize the things that you're already doing in your parish,” said Ramsey. “Talk about them in the digital world.”

9. Post fun stuff every once in a while. Social media is a conversation, after all, said Ramsey, and sometimes conversations get silly.

10. Be yourself. “Know who you are as a Catholic, know who you are as a minister, know who you are as a parish and how your parish interacts with the community around you and put that in the digital world,” he said. “When you authentically minister to people, you will reach more people.”