



Guidelines for Pastoral Relationships in Ministry

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Originally published in Review for Religious online, April 30, 2026

In this essay, Bro. Ignatius Perkins, OP, and Fr. James Sullivan, OP, present model guidelines for pastoral ministry—often referred to as a code of conduct—offered as a possible help to religious communities in developing their own standards for ministerial practice. Originally formulated in part for use within their respective communities, these guidelines are presented here to help possibly promote the cultivation of ministry environments marked by integrity, safety, and mutual respect. While they are not proscriptive, readers may also find them helpful in dealing with adult misconduct in their own communities and ministry settings.

*“I am the good shepherd: the good shepherd is one who lays down his life for his sheep.”
(John 10:11)*

Introduction

As members of religious communities and as pastoral ministers in the Church, we are steadfastly committed to protecting children, vulnerable persons and adults from abuse or misconduct in any form. The profound negative impact of victims and survivors and the falsely accused, and the harm suffered in and by the Church when misconduct is perpetrated by clergy, religious and the laity, have been a cause of great scandal. The commission of misconduct in any form is a grave offense against the dignity of the human person and all humanity. As pastoral ministers our response must be committed to protect and restore the dignity, freedom and human flourishing of all persons, not only to prevent abuse and misconduct, but also to address allegations of adult misconduct in a way that is pastoral, just, and transparent while at the same time bringing healing and hope to all victims, survivors and abusers.

Pastoral ministry in the Church has a spiritual and transcendent dimension. It is rooted in the Church's moral tradition, shaped by the religious convictions that come to us through faith in Jesus, and developed by the witness of the saints, theological reflection, the liturgy and tradition. Pastoral ministry is an integral part of the life of the Church which is ordered to directing people to God, "who alone is goodness, fullness of life, the final end of human activity, and perfect happiness."¹ At the same time, the pastoral minister, must serve others in a professional manner according to the specialized competence developed in formation and be committed to excellence, integrity, and selfless dedication to the community served. The professional ministerial relationship is like a covenant in which persons seeking out the minister entrust themselves in some way to one who has both authority and power over them.

Power in ministerial relationships is ambiguous. It can arouse suspicion and defensiveness when it is associated with coercion and exploitation. Yet, fundamentally, it is the capacity to influence others and depends upon the context and individuals involved. A person has authority who is acknowledged by the community as its representative. In ministry, this comes from Religious Profession and Ordination, commissioning or credentialing (e.g., religious educators, pastoral care directors, spiritual directors). Through the conferral of authority, the minister represents the community of faith, the Church, and even God. Fr. Richard Gula, SS, says, "having authority gives us the right to be heard and heeded in 'religious' matters, but it also carries the correlative duty to use our power and authority for the good of the community and not for personal gain."² Because of the power differential inherent in relationships between a minister and the laity, the primary burden of responsibility for behavior within them always falls on the minister, from the first day of formation until death.

¹ St. Pope John Paul II. (1993) *Veritatis Splendor*. (Rome. Italy: Libreria Editrice Vaticana. 1993). 9

² Richard M. Gula, *Ethics in Pastoral Ministry* (New York: Paulist Press, 1989). p. 68.

Guidelines For Pastoral Relationships

As pastoral ministers in the Church we must conduct ourselves in a manner consistent with the discipline, norms and teachings of the Church. These require each minister to maintain appropriate professional boundaries with all persons of all ages to avoid even the appearance of sexual impropriety, harassment, or abuse of power. If we are to be effective pastoral ministers of the Gospel, our lives must reflect our relationship with Jesus Christ through the evangelical counsels. The following Guidelines for Pastoral Relationships in Ministry are offered to help ministers achieve the goal to bring healing and hope to all persons entrusted to their pastoral care.

1. Pastoral Relationships:

A. Boundaries:³

1. Pastoral ministers assume the full burden for setting and maintaining clear and appropriate boundaries in all pastoral relationships, including the location for ministry, the start and end time of appointments, and recognizing transference and countertransference.
2. Pastoral ministers shall read and abide by the ethical standards established by their religious communities, organizations and the diocese in which they minister.
3. Pastoral ministers are responsible for recognizing the warning signs of boundary violations. Some of these warning signs include:
 - a. finding ways or excuses to be alone with a particular person;
 - b. spending excessive time with the same person;
 - c. receiving personal gifts, including money, which inevitably are associated with often unconscious or unspoken demands or expectations;
 - d. giving gifts or according favors to a person in a pastoral relationship;

³ Thomas B. Drummond, (1998). *The Ministerial Counseling Role: Guidelines for Ethical Behavior* (Chicago, IL: The Plains Group., 1998).

- e. keeping aspects of a relationship with a person secret from others (such as frequency of telephone calls, electronic communication, late night texting, private visits); and
 - f. voiced suspicions by others who have observed the minister engaging in potentially inappropriate behavior with a particular person.
4. A pastoral minister must avoid any situation that might present even the appearance of a conflict of interest between a counselor and a person being counseled.
 5. Physical contact in pastoral relationships must be respectful and consistent with the intent to provide a safe and comfortable environment that is clearly differentiated from a social occasion. Pastoral ministers shall be aware that any physical contact can be misinterpreted. Nor can they assume that an individual wants to be touched.
 6. Ministries must always be conducted in appropriate settings at appropriate times, never in places or at times that might cause confusion about the nature of a minister's relationship to the person seeking pastoral care. In physical settings, ministers must avoid unconscious interpretation by either the minister or the one seeking ministry.
 7. Pastoral ministers are responsible for seeking appropriate spiritual or psychological counseling should they find themselves at risk of acting on countertransference or a sexual or romantic attraction to a parishioner, client, counselee or any other person.
 8. Sexual contact by a pastoral minister with another person is a violation of the trust given to the minister in any pastoral relationship. This includes consensual contact, forced physical contact, and sexually explicit conversations not related to counseling issues.
 9. Ministers should avoid swearing or using foul language, vocally or in writing, especially in the presence of those whom they serve in ministry.
- B. Dual Relationships: Dual relationships become problems in pastoral ministry when roles are confused and boundaries are not respected. They do not have to become problems if the minister is:
1. being honest with him/herself;
 2. paying attention to his/her needs;

3. satisfying personal needs outside of the dual relationship through prayer, communal life, and other forms of self-care;
4. keeping the pastoral role as the primary one in the relationship, and
5. monitoring the development of the dual relationship, such as through therapy, supervision and/or spiritual direction.

C. Friendships Within Ministry:

1. Friendship is an important aspect of human life and flourishing. A minister may experience the temptation to reduce or hide the power gap in a pastoral relationship, leading to treating it as if it were a friendship. This can put him/her at greater risk of unethical behavior. One analysis of styles of pastoral leadership identifies facets of friendship and shows that several conflict with what ministry demands:⁴
 - a. Choice – friends choose each other;
 - b. Similarity – friends have certain things in common;
 - c. Mutuality – friends hold certain things in common;
 - d. Equality – friends are equal in power and status;
 - e. Reciprocity – friends give and receive equally;
 - f. Benevolence – friends love the other for themselves and not for utilitarian benefit;
 - g. Knowledge – friends invite truthful self-disclosure;
2. Ministry correlates with some aspects of mutuality and benevolence: sharing a common baptism and faith; benevolence in the sense of acting in service to our neighbor. But other aspects of friendship are incompatible with a pastoral ministry relationship. Friendship, as a matter of choice, opens the possibility of exclusion. The minister may legitimately be accused of “playing favorites” within the community of believers. The minister ought to behave in a benevolent way toward those who have sought him/her out for their own benefit. Pastoral counseling or spiritual direction is not reciprocal, the relationship is not one of equal power, and

⁴ Martha E. Storz (1993). *Pastor Power*. (Nashville, TN: Abington, Press, 1993) 111-117.

the minister can be effective without disclosing personal, intimate knowledge about himself/herself.

D. Electronic Communications and Social Media:

1. Electronic communications and social media provide valuable ways in which to preach and interact within our society and culture. However, we must remember we represent Christ and the Church as ministers; therefore, our interactions in electronic communications and social media must reflect our vowed life and the Gospel we profess.
2. Ministers must be prudent in their interactions in electronic communications and social media in any pastoral relationship. They must assume all such interactions are always public and may be shared more broadly than they intend. They must also recognize that written communication lacks the nuances and interpretive clues present in face-to-face conversations.

E. Confidentiality:

1. Information disclosed to a minister during the course of counseling, advising, or spiritual direction must be held in confidence. A breach of confidentiality occurs when a minister discloses confidential or privileged information in the absence of compelling professional reasons or as required by law.
2. Ministers must respect the right of all persons to a good reputation, both in the public and private sphere.

2. Personal Relationships:

- A. Ministers are responsible for developing resources to meet their own spiritual and emotional needs. They are also responsible for taking care of their own health, to avoid the serious impairment of judgment associated with sleep deprivation, nutritional deficiencies, and an excessive workload. Failures in these areas may render a minister susceptible to boundary violations with others.
- B. Ministers should cultivate friends inside and outside the religious community marked by the attributes outlined in 1.C.1 above. Sometimes these friends may have need for pastoral ministry. The best practice is to direct their friend

to another pastoral minister. If they choose to mix a personal and professional ministerial relationship with someone, they are at a greater risk for violating trust. In these situations it is important that the minister reflect on:

1. Which role is dominant for me in this relationship?
 2. Whose needs are being met?
 3. Self and friends should honestly discuss: How are our roles in the pastoral relationship changing the nature of our friendship?
- C. Ministers are responsible for seeking appropriate spiritual or psychological counseling should they find themselves at risk of acting on a sexual or romantic attraction to a parishioner, client, counselee or any other person.
- D. Consistent with 1.D above, ministers must be prudent in their interactions in electronic communications and social media even with friends; they must assume any such interactions are always public.
- 3. Use of Electronic Media:** Possessing, distributing, downloading or intentionally viewing real or virtual pornography is a violation of our vowed life and ethical norms. Ministers who struggle with pornography should disclose their struggles to the religious superior or pastor, in confidence, to discuss the best means to address the problem and seek professional help, including therapeutic counseling, spiritual direction, and the sacrament of Reconciliation.
- 4. Responding to Self-disclosure, Allegations, and Evidence of Impropriety:**
- A. Ministers shall follow the procedures outlined in the ministerial ethics policies of their religious orders or diocese for reporting unethical behavior for pastoral ministers, staff and volunteers at their ministry site.
 - B. If a minister witnesses evidence of boundary violations or other unethical behavior with an adult or adults by another minister, he should speak directly to the minister and give specific examples of the behavior. Regardless of what the minister's intentions are, the objective behavior is what matters. If there is some question regarding whether the behavior is appropriate or not, the ministers shall discuss the matter with the pastor or administrator. If the behavior is deemed inappropriate or unethical and the

minister refuses to change the behavior, the administrator or pastor and/or another minister is observing the behavior shall contact the administrator or pastor.

- C. If ministers are told by a third party about possible boundary violations or unethical behavior, they should encourage the third party to speak directly to the minister and offer to accompany them as a witness. If there is some question regarding whether it is appropriate or not, the minister alone shall discuss the matter with the religious superior or pastor. If the behavior is deemed inappropriate or unethical and the minister refuses to change the behavior, the religious superior or pastor and/or the minister observing the behavior shall contact the administrator or pastor.

5. Prohibited Interactions and Behaviors: In order to maintain a safe environment for ministry, the following behaviors are categorically prohibited:

- A. Inappropriate or lengthy embraces.
- B. Kissing on the mouth.
- C. Engaging in any physical, emotional, or sexual contact.
- D. Showing affection in isolated areas such as bedrooms, closets, staff-only areas, sacristies, stairwells or other private areas.
- E. Being in bed with minors or adults.
- F. Tickling or wrestling with minors or adults.
- G. Holding a minor or an adult on the lap.
- H. Any type of massage between the minister, minors and adults.
- I. Any form of unwanted affection.
- J. Compliments that relate to physique or body development.
- K. Taking an overnight trip alone with one or more minors or vulnerable adult.
- L. Driving alone in a vehicle with one or more minors or vulnerable adults.
- M. Meeting privately with minors or adults in an area without windows, or where doors cannot remain open.
- N. Introducing sexually explicit or pornographic topics, vocabulary or media
- O. Encouraging minors or adults to possess, use, share or distribute pornographic materials.
- P. Photographing minor or adults in a state of undress.

- Q. Providing alcohol, drugs, or tobacco to minors and adults.
- R. Being under the influence of alcohol or illegal drugs when supervising or ministering to minors or adults.
- S. Providing money or inappropriate or expensive gifts.
- T. Engaging in physical or verbal discipline that frightens or degrades an adult.
- U. Frequenting places where nudity or inappropriate sexual behaviors are prevalent, i.e., places which by their very purpose violate the norms of chastity or modesty.
- V. Engaging in physical psychological, written or verbal harassment of minors and adults, possibly including:
 1. Racial insults or discriminatory practices.
 2. Derogatory ethnic slurs.
 3. Persecution based on religious beliefs or practices.
 4. Disparaging remarks and treatment because of disability.
 5. Provoking bullying and ridicule as a result of illegal disclosure of medical information.
 6. Unwelcome sexual advances or touching.
 7. Sexual comments or sexual jokes.
 8. Requests for sexual favors;
 9. Display of offensive materials.

The prohibited behaviors enumerated above are intended to apply both to ministerial and non-ministerial settings. However, ministers may encounter exceptional situations (notably, with members of their own families) where a minister's prudent judgment, may derogate from strict observance from a few of these norms.

- 6. Guidelines for Positive Behaviors:** Appropriate affection between a minister, a minor and an adult can constitute a positive dimension of pastoral care. Nonetheless, touching an adult can be misunderstood and must be considered with great discretion. Depending on circumstances, it might be appropriate for a minister to engage in the following positive behaviors with minors and adults:
- A. Verbal praise.
 - B. Handshakes.

- 7. Guidelines for Pastoral Counseling:** Ministers offering pastoral counseling to minors and adults shall abide by the following guidelines:
- A. Provide the time and the environment to carefully listen and hear the experiences of those who have been abused by others.
 - B. Counseling takes place in the public portion of the organization or ministry site, and never in an isolated area or in a minister's private room.
 - C. The office door has a window or can be left open during counseling.
 - D. The relationship between a minister and a counselee remains professional, all information is kept confidential, and counseling is kept to a reasonable timeframe.
 - E. Personal or physical attraction to or from the adult is recognized and acknowledged, and the counselee is immediately referred to another minister or qualified professional.
 - F. Careful boundaries around physical contact are observed at all times; contact is never initiated by the minister.
 - G. The sacrament of penance is ordinarily celebrated in the church (or at a place and time designated for this purpose).
- 8. Guidelines for Electronic Communications and Social Media:** Ministers who are engaged in ministry to minors and adults that involves social media and/or electronic communication (including videoconferencing; chat rooms; email; social media; texting etc.) must follow the guidelines of the diocese or organization where they minister. Where such policies are lacking, unclear, or deficient, the following guidelines should be adopted:
- A. Personal accounts should not be used for ministry communication.
 - B. Acceptable hours for electronic communication with adults shall be between 8:00 am and 9:00 pm. Communication shall occur outside these hours only in emergency situations or to communicate time-sensitive information related to ministry or a ministry-related event.
 - C. Neither personal nor ministerial social media accounts shall be used to contact minors or adults. If an adult contacts a particular minister engaged in

ministry, a polite reply is permitted, but the minister is not to engage in sustained communication in this manner.

- D. A minor's and adult's personal identifiable information, including photos, email addresses, and videos, may never be posted or distributed without their consent.

9. Other Guidelines for Ministry Planning: When planning or participating in ministry events, ministers shall comply with all policies of the Diocese, their religious community, and organizations where they minister. At a minimum, ministers are to anticipate and comply with the following:

- A. Ensuring all ministry activities have been approved in advance by the religious community or Diocese, and an appropriate administrator.
- B. Communities or parishes must never provide overnight accommodations for adults in community houses
- C. Ministers must report any suspected adult abuse or misconduct (sexual, physical, verbal, neglect, harassment) to the appropriate authorities.

10. Guidelines on Residences of Ministers and Physical Space for Ministry:

- A. Anyone under the age of 18 is not permitted in the actual living spaces of the minister, unless accompanied by parent or legal guardian.
- B. Unaccompanied minors are not permitted to stay overnight anywhere in residences of religious communities or diocesan rectories.
- C. Space shall be set aside to allow ministers to meet with their families, parishioners, and others whom they serve.
- D. Administrators and pastors have the obligation to enforce these norms.
- E. Physical space for ministry must be arranged as follows:
 1. All rooms and offices designated for meeting visitors, counseling, and advising must be located outside the private and common areas of the residence.
 2. Designated rooms and times for meeting visitors and counseling must be posted and distributed.
 3. The furniture in public meeting rooms must be arranged to afford physical barriers between ministers and visitors.

4. The doors of designated offices, meeting rooms, common rooms and stairwells must have transparent window panels, which shall not be obstructed.

Final Reflections

Our pastoral relationships with minors and vulnerable adults, are both professional and personal. Thus, the definitions and norms describe both ministerial and personal relationships. Pastoral ministers must be cognizant of the high standard of conduct that our ministries demand and that the people around us have a right to expect. We must exercise the utmost prudence in every interaction with others, recognizing always the dignity, freedom and human flourishing of all those whom we serve and in our role as ministers in Church.

In our ministries and our conduct, we are guided by our commitment to celibate chastity so that “we do nothing that people might object to, so as not to bring discredit on our work as God’s servants” (2 Corinthians 6:3).

As pastoral ministers, we are bound to respect the human dignity of those to whom we minister, aided by the virtues of charity, compassion, and prudence. Prudence requires special measures in our ministries and conduct with all persons. We accept our responsibilities for establishing and maintaining clear and appropriate boundaries in all ministries and pastoral relationships so that healing and hope can be realized.

Appendix: Glossary of Terms

1. Abuse of Power: The ministers misuse their authority in pastoral relationships or in the course of ministry, either for personal gain or for the benefit of others. This occurs most often in supervisor-subordinate relationships; however, the abused party can also be a supervisor, a co-worker, or someone seeking pastoral care or guidance. An individual in a ministerial relationship may claim abuse of power if they experience the minister as pressuring or obligating them to do something against their will. Therefore, while upholding Catholic teaching at all times, it is important that the minister not force someone to act against his

or her sincere judgment of conscience. A proper pastoral procedure attempts to both expand a person's moral capacity by presenting objective moral truth and to maximize a person's strength by encouraging the next step in love toward the full appropriation of the objective norms of morality.

2. Adult: A person 18 years of age or older.
3. Adult Misconduct: A contact or interactions (physical, emotional, psychological, spiritual, verbal, electronic, written) between adults that violates human dignity, compromises pastoral relationships, confidentiality, violates boundaries, harassment (physical, sexual, verbal), transference, conflicts in relationships, and threats.
4. Allegation: A first-person accusation of abuse or misconduct of an adult brought against a current, former, or deceased minister of the community or Diocese, which is reported to the community or Diocese through any form of communication, including from anonymous sources
5. Allegation – Established: An accusation of the abuse of an adult that has been substantiated by facts and circumstances, such that there is objective certainty of its truth.
6. Confidential: Describes private information which shall be kept restricted and only be disclosed to an authorized person for legitimate reasons or because the disclosure is legally required.
7. Confidential Documents: Documents given confidential status as defined by the religious community or Diocese in its policies and procedures, or as required by canon or civil law.
8. Dual Relationships: Occur when the pastoral minister interacts with another person in more than one capacity. This happens, for example, when a pastor becomes a long-term counselor to someone on his staff, or when a friend comes to a minister for spiritual direction or ongoing pastoral counseling. They become problematic when roles get confused and boundaries are not respected.
9. Electronic Communications and Social Media: Includes (but are not limited to) the activities that take place through online tools and sites such as email, phone conversations, texting, instant messaging, using social media platforms such as Facebook, YouTube, WhatsApp, or Twitter, profiles on social networking sites, blogs, and requesting to be friends or approving friend requests.

10. Harassment: The systematic, continued, unwelcome and annoying actions, including physical or verbal threats and demands that create an offensive or hostile work environment.
11. Harassment-Sexual: Consists of sexual advances, requests for sexual favors, or “verbal, visual, or physical conduct of a sexual nature or of a hostile nature based on gender, that were unwelcome and pervasive or severe”.
12. High Risk Minister: A minister who has abused a minor and adults in the past and is likely to abuse again if left untreated and/or unsupervised.
13. Member: A minister for whom the religious community or Diocese is responsible according to canon law and the rules of the religious community.
14. Ministry:
 - A. Ecclesiastical Ministry: Any ministry under the authority of a diocesan bishop.
 - B. Public Ministry: Any ministry under the authority of a diocesan bishop, and/or the sponsorship of a religious institute;
15. Pastoral Relationship: This is an association, connection or dealing between a person with a special authority and competence serving in a ministerial capacity and an individual with a religious need. This includes a minister’s pastoral relationships in (but not limited to) preaching, teaching, counseling, spiritual direction and guidance, nursing, the Sacrament of Reconciliation and the celebration of the Liturgy. Pastoral relationships also include service in a supervisory role over others, such as a pastor to a vicar or other members of his staff.
16. Personal Continuing Care Plan (PCCP): A formal, written supervision program for a minister who has an established allegation of adult misconduct.
17. Pornography: Any representation of a minor or adult, regardless of the means used, involved in explicit sexual activities, whether real or simulated, or any representation of sexual organs for primarily sexual purposes.
18. Adult Misconduct Review Board: A group of volunteers with unique knowledge, expertise and experience who provide counsel and recommendations to the administrator or pastor in situations involving the abuse and misconduct of adults.

19. Report: A third-party accusation of abuse or adult misconduct brought against a current, former, or deceased minister that is brought to the administrator or pastor, including reports made anonymously.
20. Risk Assessment: A prediction of the degree of possibility of re-offense by someone with a known history of abusive behaviors, offenses, and adult misconduct.
21. Sexual Contact: The intentionally touching another person's intimate body parts (including genitals) or the clothing covering the immediate area surrounding those body parts. It also includes intentionally touching the erogenous zone of another (this includes, but is not limited to the thighs, buttocks, pubic region, breasts or chest), or being touched by another person in any of these areas for the purpose of sexual arousal or gratification.
22. Sexual Exploitation: The sexual contact between a minister and a person with whom the minister has a pastoral relationship, regardless of who initiates the sexual contact.
23. Social Media:⁵
 - A. Social Media is defined as any form of electronic communication through which a user creates, utilizes, accesses, retrieves, and/or visits online communities or systems to share information, ideas, personal messages, and other content.
 - B. For the purposes of this Code of Conduct, Social Media is to encompass, but is not limited to, all of the following: email, texting, chat rooms, instant messaging, social networks, video messaging, on-line message boards, gaming systems, landline and mobile telephones, on-line voice communications, etc.
24. Transference: Occurs when a person redirects some of their feelings or desires for another person onto an entirely different person. In an ongoing ministerial relationship involving spiritual direction or pastoral counseling, the minister can become a metaphor – a stand-in for someone else. Your behavior may be

⁵ National Catholic Social Services *Code of Conduct*. (Washington, DC: National Catholic Services, 2018). See end of document for additional resources.

aligned with how the person you are seeing wishes another would have acted toward them, or may remind them of someone else's behavior. For a priest, being called "Father" is an invitation for transference for someone who had issues with their father, and the transference could be positive or negative. Transferences are distortion of reality.

25. Counter-transference: Occurs when the minister does not recognize transference and treats it as accurate and responds accordingly. For example, an effective minister may elicit such gratitude in the person receiving ministry that the individual cannot contain their enthusiasm and shows it in ways that may violate boundaries. Acting on the counter-transference as if it were really about you will undermine the effectiveness of ministry and potentially lead to more serious boundary violations.
26. Vulnerable Adult:
 - A. Persons 18 years of age and older, with physical, mental, emotional or behavioral conditions;
 - B. Adults with an illness, or situation that renders an inability to defend, protect or get help when injured or abused;
 - C. Individuals whose condition or disability impairs their ability to provide adequately for their own care, including adults who habitually lack the use of reason, along with individuals who have a court-appointed guardian.
 - D. The elderly, whose various circumstances might make them susceptible to persons or situations that cause them harm, or individuals who are residents or patients within hospitals, group homes, nursing homes, day service facilities, day activity centers, adult foster-care homes or an adult who receives care services from a licensed home care or personal care service within their own homes.

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Additional Resources:

Archdiocese of Atlanta (2016), *Archdiocese of Atlanta's Social Media Policy*. Smyrna, GA: Archdiocese of Atlanta.

Dicastery for Communication. (2023). *Towards Full Presence: A Pastoral Reflection on Engagement with Social Media*. Rome, Italy: Dicastery for Communication

United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (2014). *Social Media Guidelines*. Washington: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops. (<https://www.usccb.org/committees/communications/social-media-guidelines>)

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