

Giving up online social networks for Lent? A virtual fast: A virtual fast

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Most days you can find college sophomore Adan Farrah on his laptop checking in with his classmates, looking at photos and updating his personal page on Facebook.

For the 19-year-old and many of his friends, the social networking site is something close to an obsession. "I'm on there a total of three hours a day—four hours on weekends," said Farrah, a student at Kutztown University in Pennsylvania.

But on Ash Wednesday, Farrah decided to quit Facebook cold turkey. No more status updates. No more commenting on photos posted by classmates.

In a new twist to an old religious tradition, a growing number of Christian technophiles swore off Facebook, My Space, Twitter and other technology for Lent. Thousands joined "Giving up Facebook for Lent" groups on the site, replacing the photos on their profiles with boxes announcing that they will be absent for the next six weeks.

Religious leaders and scholars are encouraging the faithful to unplug from such sites in a virtual Lenten fast.

In Italy, for instance, bishops are urging Catholics to do without an array of electronic appliances, including iPods and devices to send text messages, according to Associated Press. "It's a small way to remember the importance of concrete and not virtual relationships," suggested the Modena diocese.

[Century assistant editor Steve Thorngate wrote in a February 27 post on theolog.org, the Century's blog, that he's giving up for Lent the acerbic, "gotcha" style of debate that's so tempting online: "I'll keep writing posts and commenting on others'. But I won't sarcastically put down people's ideas, on a blog or anywhere else. Come Easter, I hope to have grown in my preference for edifying dialogue over entertaining bomb-throwing."]

“Oftentimes, we are just spending too much time on these things. We’re out of balance,” said John Grimm, who teaches Christian ethics at Seton Hall University in New Jersey. “Giving up something we enjoy and like is to make restitution—to give penance for our sins.”

Going on a Facebook fast counts as a Lenten sacrifice in God’s eyes, said Grimm, a priest who recently joined Facebook at the behest of students. But rather than forgo Facebook for Lent, he planned to cut down on the time he spends surfing the Web for entertainment and sports news.

The idea, Grimm said, is to replace the time we spend doing something we enjoy with charitable acts, prayer, spiritual reading or something else that brings us closer to God.

Facebook began in 2004 as a social networking site for college students and quickly grew into a nationwide phenomenon with more than 175 million members. The idea of giving up Facebook for Lent was started by students at Christian colleges.

Jozef Jankovic, a Facebook user from Michigan, said he heard about the idea and started one of more than a dozen “Giving up Facebook for Lent” groups on the site this year that advocate a Facebook fast.

“I like that group because it really warns you about risks of virtual communication,” Jankovic said. “Communication can be very helpful—but on the other hand very seductive and addictive.” *-Religion News Service*