

UNDERSTANDING THE

Social Media Algorithm

Communicating pastorally and effectively in the digital world

One-hour practical formation session



Today's central question

A practical lens for pastoral communication

"How can we communicate the Gospel in a way that people notice, understand and respond to?"

Not: "How do we beat the algorithm?"

But: "How do we serve people within algorithmic spaces?"

Learning path

Six movements in one hour

01

Stop scrolling

03

Read signals

Selection → Prediction → Ranking — The Six Rs

05

Redesign content

PASTOR framework

02

Decode

Attention

04

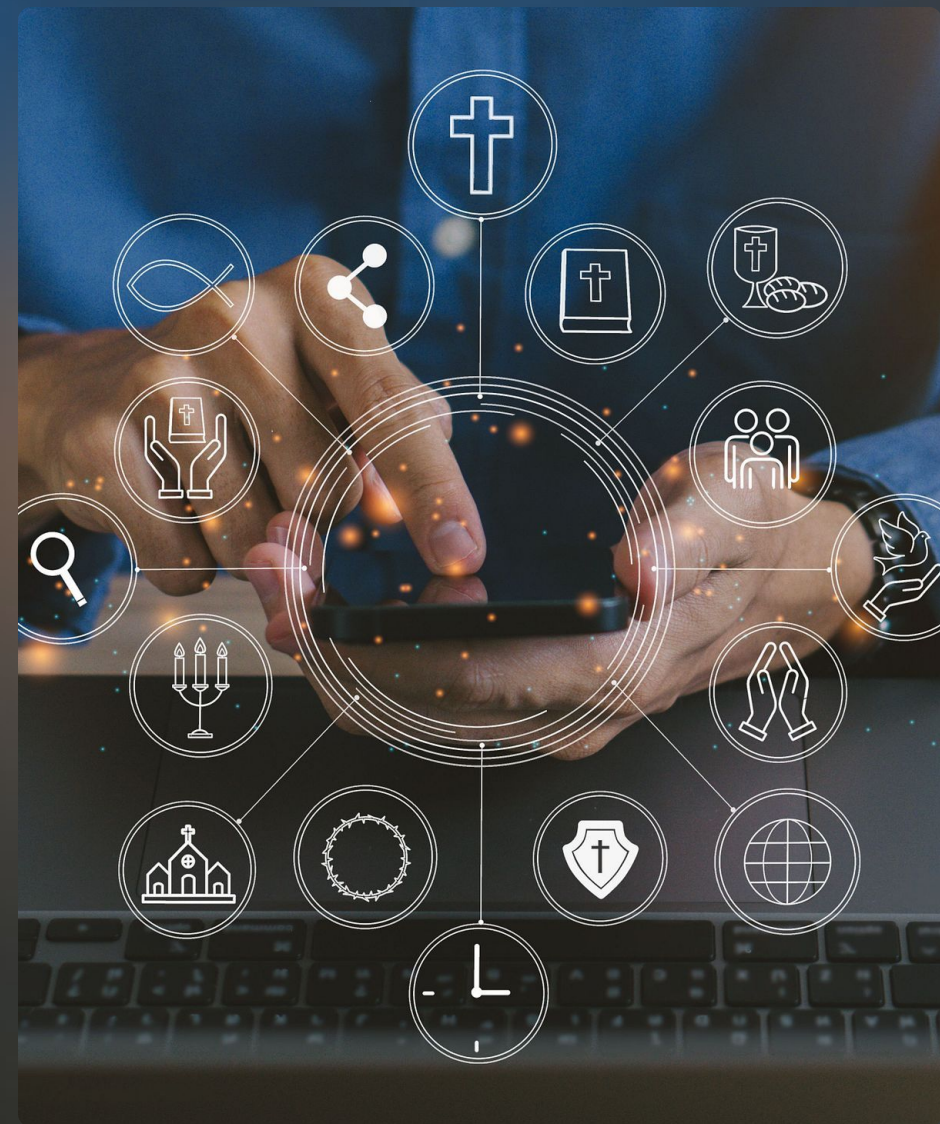
Choose platform

Different spaces, different behaviours

06

Evaluate

CARE + pastoral integrity



OPENING ACTIVITY

Why did you stop scrolling?

Take 60 seconds: open your most-used platform, scroll five posts, and identify the first post that makes you pause.

The first clue: attention

Every user action trains the feed

Pause

Click

Watch

Replay

Like

Comment

Share

Save

The algorithm studies attention in order to predict future attention.

What is a social media algorithm?

A simple working definition

A set of automated rules and prediction systems that decide what content is shown to each user, in what order, and at what time.

- Not a single "mystery machine"
- Different ranking systems may govern Feed, Search, Reels, Shorts, Stories and Ads
- Each user receives a personalised experience



Analogy: the digital librarian

Recommendation is personalised selection

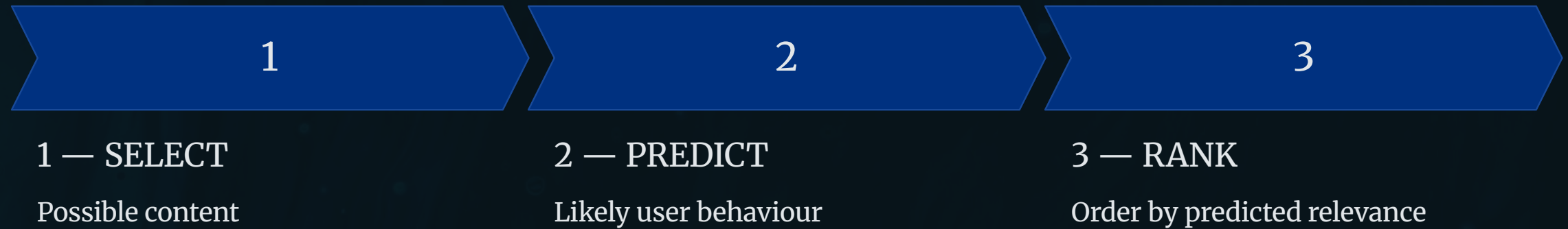
A librarian may know...

What you borrowed, finished, returned quickly, preferred, and what similar readers are choosing.

The algorithm does this at massive speed and scale.

Three basic actions

How a platform moves from millions of posts to one feed



Millions of posts do not reach everyone. They pass through prediction and ranking.

Personalised feeds

Two followers can see the same page differently

Follower A

Sees youth retreat video because they watch youth ministry and prayer content.

Register

Follower B

Sees parish photos because they often react to family and community posts.

View album

Follower C

Does not see today's post because they rarely interact with the page.

Follow

The Six Rs

The signals pastoral communicators must understand

Relevance

Human need

Relationship

Trust

Retention

Staying power

Response

Meaningful action

Recency

Right moment

Reliability

Credibility

The Six Rs help us move from "posting information" to "creating encounter."

R1: Relevance

Is this useful or interesting to this person?

Pastoral application

Begin with a real human situation.

Example

Instead of: "Retreat on Friday."

Try: "Feeling spiritually tired this Lent?"

"Begin with the person before the institution."

R2: Relationship

Does this person interact with us regularly?

Pastoral application

A parish page is not only a noticeboard.

Example

Reply to comments, feature people, invite stories and build trust.

"The algorithm detects interaction; people experience relationship."

R3: Retention

Will the viewer stay with the content?

Pastoral application

Reach the message quickly.

Example

Weak: long greeting.

Strong: "You may pray every day and still feel God is silent."

"Begin with the message, not the ceremony."

R4: Response

What meaningful action follows?

Pastoral application

Invite participation, not empty engagement.

Example

"Save this prayer."

"Share an intention."

"Send this to someone who needs hope."

"Do not merely ask for engagement; invite participation."

R5: Recency

Is the content timely?

Pastoral application

Post at the moment of pastoral need.

Example

Sunday Gospel, exam season, feast day, relief updates, registration deadlines.

"Timeliness is pastoral care."

R6: Reliability

Does the content deliver what it promises?

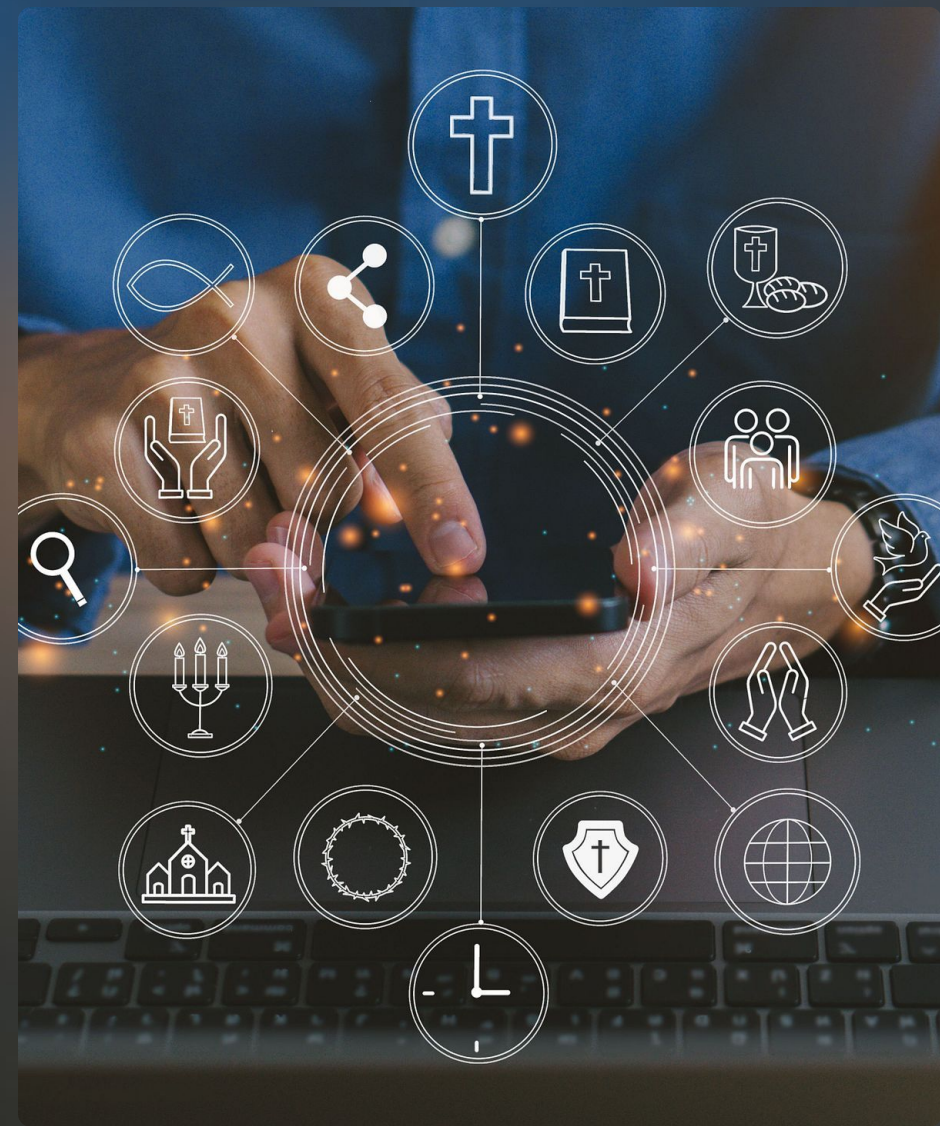
Pastoral application

Trust sustains communication.

Example

Avoid misleading titles, false claims, poor sources and careless theology.

"A click begins communication; trust sustains it."



PLATFORM CHOICE

There is no single social media algorithm

Each platform has its own behaviour, format, audience habits and discovery logic.

Facebook & Instagram

Community recognition + visual clarity

Facebook works well for...

Parish updates, event albums, live celebrations, groups, longer discussions, local appeals.

Instagram works well for...

Visual prayers, Reels, testimonies, behind-the-scenes ministry, youth invitations.

Guiding questions:

Will the community recognise itself?

Can the message be understood visually and quickly?

YouTube

Searchable formation + long-term discovery

Useful for

Catechesis, homilies, Q&A, Bible study, documentaries, music, formation series.

Title shift

Weak: "Sunday Reflection – Episode 14"

Strong: "Why Does God Seem Silent When We Pray?"

"What question is the viewer searching for?"



Shorts & Reels

Discovery beyond existing followers

1

Hook

Do you feel connected online but
alone inside?

Watch

2

One idea

One spiritual insight, one question,
one practice.

Save

3

Next step

Invite to retreat, longer video, prayer
or conversation.

Act

WhatsApp

Trust-based sharing, not public ranking

Useful for

Reminders, schedules, prayer intentions, emergency information, small-group formation, personal follow-up.

Guiding question

Is this useful and trustworthy enough for someone to forward personally?

WhatsApp effectiveness depends heavily on relationship, clarity and credibility.

Why good pastoral content sometimes fails

A message can be spiritually valuable but digitally ineffective

Audience is unclear

Opening is too slow

Message is institution-centred

Too many ideas in one post

Visual or audio weak

No clear next action

Posted too late

Page does not build relationships

Parish Notice

Dear brothers and sisters, we announce that the parish youth retreat will be held...

Maybe later

Problem: the post begins with the institution, not the person.

Algorithm vs pastoral mission

Reach is useful only when it serves encounter

Algorithm	Pastoral Mission
Attention	Encounter
Reaction	Understanding
Popularity	Faithfulness
Personalisation	Communion
Clicks	Transformation

Three pastoral temptations

Effectiveness must be guided by mission

1. Vanity

High views do not automatically mean fruitful ministry.

2. Manipulation

Fear, scandal and exaggeration may attract attention but damage trust.

3. Imitation

Not every trend respects the Gospel, the audience or the sacred subject.

"Are we adapting the form to serve the Gospel?"



PRACTICAL ACTIVITY

From parish notice to pastoral content

Work in groups. Transform a basic youth retreat announcement into a short video, Reel, poster caption or WhatsApp invitation.

Original announcement

Diagnose before you redesign

The parish youth retreat will be held on Saturday, 22 August, from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. in the parish hall. All young people are requested to participate. Registration closes on 18 August.

Question 1

Who exactly needs this?

Question 2

What human need is touched?

Question 3

What action should follow?

The PASTOR framework

A pastoral content planning tool

P

Person

A

Ache / Aspiration

S

Stop-scroll opening

T

Truth / Transformation

O

Opportunity

R

Response

P — Person

Speak to someone, not everyone

Possible audience

Young people who feel spiritually disconnected.

Another audience

Students facing pressure and uncertainty.

Another audience

Youth searching for direction and belonging.

"Who exactly needs this message?"

A — Ache or Aspiration

Connect with experience before information

Aches

- Loneliness
- Stress
- Confusion
- Spiritual dryness

Aspirations

- Peace
- Friendship
- Direction
- Renewed faith

What need or desire does the message address?

S — Stop-scroll Opening

Make the value recognisable immediately

Hook 1

Do you feel connected online but alone inside?

Hook 2

When was the last time you gave yourself one quiet day?

Hook 3

Are you carrying questions you cannot discuss with anyone?

Hook 4

What if one day could help you rediscover your direction?

T + O + R

Truth, opportunity and response

T — Transformation

"One day to step away from noise, pray, listen and rediscover that God has not abandoned you."

O — Opportunity

"Join other young people for prayer, music, honest conversation and friendship."

R — Response

"Register before 18 August. Come as you are—and bring a friend."

Sample completed 30-second script

Use this to guide groups

Opening

Do you ever feel connected online but alone inside?

Human need

Sometimes we do not need another notification. We need a place to pause, breathe and listen.

Value

Our parish youth retreat is one day to reconnect with yourself, with others and with God.

Details

Saturday, 22 August, 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. in the parish hall.

Pause

Response

Register before 18 August. Come as you are—and bring a friend.

CARE checklist

Platform effectiveness before publishing

C — Clear

One central message, quickly understood

A — Audience-centred

Begins with a real human need

R — Retentive

Opening and pacing hold attention

E — Engaging

Invites a meaningful next action

Pastoral integrity checklist

Effectiveness must remain ethical

- Is the message true and theologically responsible?
- Does it respect human dignity and privacy?
- Is the title honest?
- Does it encourage hope and communion?
- Does it avoid unnecessary conflict or manipulation?
- Would we explain publicly why we created it?

+ human relevance

+ clear storytelling

+ authentic relationship

+ ethical responsibility

Personal commitment

One practical change for your next post

In my next pastoral post, I will stop
_____ and start
_____.

Examples:

- stop long introductions • start with the human question
- stop speaking to everyone • identify one audience
- stop asking only for likes • invite meaningful participation



Final takeaway

Do not create content for an algorithm.

Create valuable encounters for people in a form that the algorithm can recognise and distribute.

The algorithm asks: Will this person pay attention?

The pastoral communicator asks: Will this encounter move the person towards truth, hope, communion and Christ?

