



**Guidance on Use of Virtual
Platforms in Faith
Formation & Youth Ministry
Programs**

**ROMAN CATHOLIC DIOCESE
OF ALBANY**

OFFICE OF SAFE ENVIRONMENT

**OFFICE OF LAY MINISTRY & PARISH FAITH
FORMATION**

Guidance on **Use of Virtual Platforms in Faith Formation & Youth Ministry Programs**

The COVID-19 pandemic has given rise to the use of a variety of virtual platforms in faith formation and youth ministry programs. What began out of necessity, now has the potential to become a vehicle for offering faith formation and youth ministry in new and creative ways – even beyond the time of COVID-19. Therefore, we offer the following guidance which is based on our existing diocesan policies, advice gleaned from other organizations such as the [American Camp Association](#), as well as insights from diocesan staff.

1. The decision to use virtual means in general – and which platform(s) in particular - should be made in a collaborative fashion between the pastor/parish life coordinator and the catechetical/youth ministry leader(s).
2. Choose platforms that are reputable, registered in the United States and provide good privacy and security features. Parish accounts for such platforms are preferable - with a minimum of two adults with official organizational capacity having full access to the account, as per diocesan Social Media Use Policy. Paid – not free- accounts should be used as they generally provide the best security features as well as enhanced capabilities for users.
3. Any virtual gathering (using Zoom, FaceTime, Google Meets etc..) is to be conducted as if it were an in-person gathering. All safe environment protocols (catechist volunteer application, background check, Virtus or CMG Connect, the diocesan Standard Code of Conduct, Technology Policy and Social Media Use Policy all still apply. Catechetical/Youth Ministry Leaders should review these policies with catechists. See the [safe environment page](#) on the diocesan portal to access the most current version of these policies.
4. Due to the extraordinary circumstances of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, parental permission for their child/youth to participate in catechetical/youth ministry sessions – whether using virtual, in-person, or hybrid model - should be obtained either as part of the registration form, or by way of a separate form. (See sample provided.)
5. Parents should be advised of the schedule and topics for all virtual sessions. Parents who express a hesitation to have their child/youth participate should be met with the utmost pastoral sensitivity and be given a mutually agreed-upon alternative.
6. Parents should be given the option of having their child/youth participate by audio only.

7. Catechetical/Youth Ministry Leaders should always have access to all scheduled sessions, and should regularly join sessions.
8. Catechists cannot initiate any unscheduled virtual sessions without the prior approval of the catechetical/youth ministry leader, and the catechetical/youth ministry leader should have full access to the session.
9. There should be no one-on-one virtual sessions with children or young people unless absolutely necessary and only if a parent is present for the entire time.
10. Unless parents are present for a family-based session, as a best practice, virtual sessions should include the catechist and either: a.) another catechist; or b.) the catechetical/youth ministry leader, or c.) another adult (such as a parent) who has satisfactorily completed all diocesan safe environment requirements. As noted above, it is expected that catechetical/youth ministry leaders regularly join all virtual sessions.
11. Professional and modest dress is required for adults, children, and youth during all virtual sessions.
12. Please be mindful of your screen background (i.e. what others can see behind you on camera). All views should be appropriate. Appropriate spaces could be a home office, living room, dining room but never a bedroom. If possible, a bare background is advised. Please remind parents and young people to make sure their screen backgrounds are appropriate as well. Remember - you are generally visible on camera throughout the entire session no matter what appears on the screen.
13. Publicly advertising a virtual session is discouraged. Invitation only is best - observing the requirements noted above in point 2.
14. As moderator, know and use whatever controls the platform has to limit the chance of unacceptable behavior (e.g. restrict who enters a meeting, disable private chat feature between participants, disable screen sharing unless/until needed, disable any file-sharing features, mute participants, etc.).
15. Parents should be encouraged to have updated security features installed on computers and to exercise prudence as to the location in the home where children/young people use computers for online sessions.

16. While direct text and/or messaging with young people during normal circumstances is discouraged, in this time of pandemic restrictions, it may be more of a reality. The directives about text based communications outlined in the diocesan Social Media Use Policy should be observed, especially informing parents of such communication, and maintaining professionalism and appropriate boundaries. Our role is one of listening, support and encouragement to families. We are not friends or buddies with children or youth. If at any time during these conversations, young people express any form of abuse or mental health concerns, it is our responsibility to follow our normal reporting guidelines. The Office of Safe Environment is available to assist you.
17. It is always important that we be mindful of what we, as ministers, share about our personal lives during a virtual session with children/young people, or on social media - and this is even more important during these unprecedented times.

Office of Safe Environment can be reached at 518-453-6655, or by email at safeenv@rcda.org

Office of Lay Ministry & Parish Faith Formation can be reached at (518) 453-6670, or by email at david.amico@rcda.org.



Roman Catholic Diocese of Albany, 40 North Main Avenue, Albany, NY 12206

SAMPLE

(This can be a separate form or incorporated into existing registration forms.)

**PARENTAL CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN FAITH FORMATION/YOUTH
MINISTRY PROGRAMS
CATECHETICAL YEAR 2020 – 2021**

I hereby give my consent for my child(ren) to participate in the faith formation/youth ministry programming for the 2020 – 2021 catechetical year. I understand that this programming will be offered *(List program model – in-person, or hybrid: in-person & online, or entirely online. You may also note if the listed model will be reevaluated in January.)*

Names of Children/Youth:

Parent/Guardian Signature:

Date: _____