

Written Representation 49

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Select Committee on Deliberate Online Falsehoods – Causes, Consequences and Countermeasures – Input from the Roman Catholic Church of Singapore

The Catholic Church in Singapore is familiar with the phenomenon of “fake news”. While we have not been the target of malicious and deliberate falsehoods, there have certainly been instances of falsehoods spreading through social media in our community. Some of these include:

- Reports that well-known persons were sick or dead;
- Individuals, some of them from overseas, spreading false Catholic teaching;
- Individuals promoting sensational “prophecies” which could cause alarm; and
- Claims of local “miracles” which turned out to be based on natural phenomena.

While none of these falsehoods has defamed any racial or religious group, the Catholic Church keeps a close eye on the local social media scene. We are aware that some individuals might take a hostile or negative view of non-Catholics. We do not want such views to take root in Singapore.

Awareness of the dangers of “fake news” stretches up to the top ranks of the Catholic Church. The Pope himself has made it the theme of this year’s upcoming World Communications Day (13 May 2018), warning that “fake news” damages the social fabric because it:

- Spreads quickly due to people’s “greed” – the desire for popularity and influence;
- Exploits people’s prejudices and weaknesses to generate fear and anger;
- Dehumanises its targets and dismisses their point of view;
- Reports the truth selectively; and
- Even when factually accurate, is pitched in a way which sows discord and hatred

The Church believes that the best way to handle misunderstandings or minor falsehoods which do not impact Singapore’s safety and religious harmony is through public education. It is no longer possible to stop “fake news” simply by blocking websites or publications because social media utilises person-to-person sharing.

It has established channels on Facebook, Instagram, Telegram and WhatsApp so that its members can receive clarifications swiftly and directly from official sources.

It will also be launching a public campaign in conjunction with World Communications Day this May to sensitise local Catholics to be more discerning about what they read and share on social media.

Where needed the Catholic Church will work with government agencies or ministries to provide correct information and knowledge about practices or specific seasons that are celebrated by the Church. An example of such collaboration is an MCCY Corporate Communications social media video about Easter. This video will be used to inform audiences on the true meaning and significance of Easter. Consulting religious bodies on such content helps ensure that the content and facts presented are accurate.

The State already has legislation to tackle the spread of racial and religious discord, as well as slander and defamation. The Catholic Church has no comment on whether to expand legislation to other arenas. However, doing so might result in the impression that the authorities are trying to 'cover up' the truth or to silence dissent. It may also be difficult to ascertain whether a falsehood was created maliciously through misunderstanding. At the end of the day, legislation may help to discourage the creation and spread of online falsehoods, but public education is more vital for creating a discerning and socially conscious generation of Singaporean social media users