



▲ Fr. Benjamin Gildas has been doing podcasts since the medium was in its infancy.

“The Front Door of Our Church Is Essentially a Digital Front Door”

When Fr. Benjamin Gildas launched his first podcast, *No Avatars Allowed*, while studying at Lutheran Theological Seminary in Philadelphia in 2008, the medium was still in its infancy. “There were podcasts out there, but it was so niche at that time,” recalls Gildas, who has been rector of Incarnation Holy Sacrament (IHS) Church in Drexel Hill since 2013. That first podcast, created and co-hosted with fellow seminarian Joshua Wise, focused on two passionately shared interests: video games and theology. The podcast was successful but, as Gildas was about to be ordained as a priest about five years later, he left podcasting. (Gildas and Wise, now Theologian in Residence at IHS, relaunched the *No Avatars Allowed* podcast in 2018, and, in October 2019, Church Publishing published “*No Avatars Allowed: Theological Reflections on Video Games*,” based on the podcast by Wise, with a Foreword by Gildas.)

Finding he missed podcasting, in 2014 Gildas launched “*Priest Pulse*” with co-host Fr. Colin Chapman. The podcast has been downloaded more than 55,000 times since it started, and has a loyal following in the Episcopal Church. Gildas, a member of

Anamchara Fellowship, a religious order founded in the tradition of the Episcopal Church, with a Celtic spirit, talked with *Caminos* about podcasting, the church’s “digital front door,” and how to make digital ministry a natural, authentic extension of your own ministry.

What was your intention in launching *Priest Pulse* initially? What did you have in mind?

To be honest with you, I don’t know that I had a great intention. I don’t think I was thinking missionally about it. I didn’t do the important work of saying, here’s going to be our mission statement and we’re going to stick to that. At the beginning of our show, it was really, what is Ben interested in talking about? What are the topics that are peaking my interest and let’s cover those. So it took me some time to learn to think missionally about everything, really. To have a mission statement for everything, even a purpose statement for my own life. Through doing this, I have learned the importance of clarifying your purpose, clarifying your mission, and letting that drive your decisions about what you’ll do. And in podcasts, that means letting the mission statement, letting the purpose statement, drive your content.

Clarifying Your Purpose

Do you now have a mission statement for Priest Pulse?

From the very beginning, we had an amazing relationship with Church Publishing, which has been a huge part of the reason we have been successful because they want their authors to have a platform. I think that's part of the relationship between publishing and podcasting, which has a long and glorious tradition of working together. So Church Publishing has from the beginning hooked us up with authors whenever we want. And it really helped steer the content of our show in that direction because the way we were getting good content was by getting great authors to come on and talk about their books. So we definitely had a lot of resonance in that way.

We found our voice in the podcasting world, which was to talk about relevant issues in the church, to talk about church growth and spiritual growth. Basically, I think the mission of Priest Pulse is to discuss contemporary issues of what it means to be the church and the Episcopal Church in the 21st century. And we didn't go into the show with that clearly labeled as our mission. It just became that based on our own interests and the people who were willing to come on our show and give us time.

You talk a lot about the “digital front door of the church” and the need for the church to embrace digital ministry. Why is that so important?

You have at least two front doors to your church. We think a lot in our congregations about the experience someone will have when they open the door to the church. They show up on a Sunday morning, they go to the front door—what do they see? Who's the first person that greets them? How are they treated when they walk through? Will someone give them a bulletin and a hymnal and help them to their seat? Will someone be friendly to them? What does it look like in your narthex or vestibule, whatever you have,



if you have one? How welcoming is that experience? What does a newcomer experience when they come through that door? We think about that stuff a whole lot.

But if we're not thinking about the digital front door, the data is very clear that almost everyone who visits a church to check it out has already checked you out online. This is all just data driven. This is definitely not out of my head. This is something lots of people have observed and now talk about as far as evangelism. The front door of our church is essentially a digital front door. If you're church shopping, if you are actively searching for a church, then before you get to that red door at the building, you've gone through an online front door, you've checked out the website. I think we spend a lot less time thinking about what that experience is like for the person. How welcoming is it? How easy is it for them to learn the information they want to learn in order to come through your physical door?

The statistics say the pastor page and the sermon page are the most visited pages on a church website. People want to know, who's this pastor going to be? Is it somebody I can see as my own pastor? What do their sermons sound like? What time is the service on Sunday? And

how do I find the church? It's not rocket science. If a church website includes just those things, I feel like they hit a home run. That's like having a very well laid out, friendly, welcoming narthex.

But I think the idea of the digital front door goes even beyond that. What I've come to believe is that in the context of the 21st century, I don't think we can think of the digital front door as just the means of getting someone's body into our pews. We have to treat it as its own relevant ministry—that the digital world is its own front door to the church and to the church existing in a digital space.

Because the reality is that people already live in that digital space. People already spend an enormous chunk of their lives on social media or on online platforms. If you're not a church person, if you're not a person who goes to church regularly, it's just so foreign of a concept to get up and go to a building on a Sunday morning into a physical space when they can get the kind of content that feeds them, that feeds their soul, that nourishes them—they can get that online. So our churches need to think about the fact that digital is as relevant a ministry space—if not more relevant—than the physical spaces we think of on our property. ►



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▲ Fr. Gildas references a new book titled *No Avatars Allowed*, based on a podcast he does with Joshua Wise.

I still believe that people need to come through our doors in order to receive the sacraments, in order to be part of the Christian community and become disciples. I really believe that. But I think if we don't take that digital space seriously as the front door, we're not going to get people to come through our front doors anymore because we're not going to be relevant to them.

What are some of the ways congregations can start building a more welcoming digital front door?

I think a lot of times, when it comes to this digital stuff, people think like, “Oh I'm supposed to do a podcast because that's what people are doing.” It used to be, “I'm supposed to do a Facebook page because everyone has a Facebook page.”

Well, that one's actually probably true. Everyone should have a Facebook page. (laughs) There always seem to be “the newest thing” and people feel like that's what I need to do because everyone else is doing that. I would steer people away from that mentality. Don't do something in the digital world because you think you're supposed to. Do it because it's a natural, authentic extension of your own ministry.

For example, we started using the website Meetup.org to launch a gaming ministry at our church. My staff—Dr. Joshua Wise, our Theologian in Residence, and our community coordinator, Blaine Martin—and

I started this podcast network called the All Ports Open network. We relaunched the No Avatars Allowed podcast and started a bunch of other podcasts that were mostly focused around the intersection of gaming and gaming culture and Christian faith. We create podcasts for it, but we simultaneously launched a game ministry—a physical game ministry—at our church called Saturday Night Strategists. People bring board games and play board games every Saturday night. The game night has been around for two years, and we have over 600 members in our Meetup group online. So if I want to get the word out about a church event, I have an email list of more than 600 people, almost all of whom are not members of my congregation.

We launched this game ministry because I was into games and the people on my staff were into games. So we thought we'd launch this ministry that is focused around games because it's a natural extension of our own passions and interests. And there are people out there who are a segment of the community who are not being reached, or evangelized, who we could reach. For any other priest in this diocese or any other lay leader or vestry member in this diocese, I would say: What is it that interests you and your congregation and what would be a natural, authentic digital extension of that?

From your own experience, what are some of the pitfalls people should look out for if they're thinking about doing this?

My personal experience has taught me, above all, something that is pretty common sense, which is that the KISS rule applies to absolutely everything: Keep It Simple, Stupid. In all these things, I really think you can get away with keeping it simple. And in fact, you should, because I think it's better. For example, when we launched our new website for our church, we just used Wix, a free, very simple editing program to put up a very simple website. We had two or three things we wanted the website to do. When you open the website, the first thing your eyes see is the service time, right away on the front of the screen. Holy Eucharist is 10 a.m. on Sundays. Boom. Right there. The most simple thing you could do. We wanted it to have our address and phone number easy to find. And we wanted it to have a pastor page that says who I am, and have our sermons on the website. And we've grown from there, adding a calendar with events and other features. But those simple things are the most important. Just start with keeping it simple. That's the most important thing because it's easy to bite off more than you can chew. ■