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Social media can hurt quality of dialogue, pope says

Isabella R. Moyer | Jan. 25, 2013 NCR Today

On Thursday, Pope Benedict released his message [1] for the 47th World Communications Day. Timed to coincide with the Feast of St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists, it is titled "Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization."

The pope continues to promote the use of social media:

> These spaces, when engaged in a wise and balanced way, help to foster forms of dialogue and debate which, if conducted respectfully and with concern for privacy, responsibility and truthfulness, can reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family.

He acknowledges that fame or the loudest voices often draw the largest followers. When this happens, the quality of dialogue is often at risk.

> The social media thus need the commitment of all who are conscious of the value of dialogue, reasoned debate and logical argumentation; of people who strive to cultivate forms of discourse and expression which appeal to the noblest aspirations of those engaged in the communication process.

Just Wednesday, the editorial staff of *The Southern Cross*, South Africa's Catholic weekly, made the difficult decision to shut down their discussion boards because of "intolerable levels of hectoring polemic; sometimes accompanied by calumny and distortion." The following observation was made in their editorial, "Scorched Earth Catholics [2]":

> It is deplorable that the quality of discourse in the Catholic Church, at least in its Anglophone regions, has become increasingly nasty. Debates within the Church tend to resemble more the scorched earth partisanship of US politics than discussions between fellow disciples of Our Lord.
>
> Often those with whom we disagree are regarded as enemies whose arguments must be mercilessly vanquished -- all this predicated on a burning love for Jesus and his Church!

It must be an incredibly sad thing to have to close down a discussion board, for it closes the opportunity for the sharing of ideas, opinions and wisdom. Here at *NCR*, the discussion boards are a valuable and valued tool. All are invited to speak, and the staff works hard to ensure that certain standards are maintained.

In his message, the pope also speaks of the need to engage patiently and respectfully with those who question and doubt. The growing dialogue in social networks merely "confirms the importance and relevance of religion in public debate and in the life of society."

The pope's message deserves some respectful discussion both within and outside of curial halls, and I hope this discussion takes place. While it seems that we have the papal blessing to use social media and networking for

dialogue with others, do we have the same freedom to dialogue within our own church?

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[1] http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day_en.html
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