Opinion



by Dennis Coday

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A reader sent me an email yesterday asking a question:

> I wondered if you planned to post an update on your intentions for the comments system anytime soon. Your announcement in December indicated that a new system would be forthcoming, but it has been nearly two months now and there's still no new information. Have comments been permanently dropped? Thanks for any clarification you can provide.

Here's your update. Comments are not gone forever, however, their restoration is some months away. That answer will leave many disappointed, I know, but that is the only answer I have.

To be clear: As an organization, NCR values the comments. I personally miss being able to read comments. We see comments as part of our mission of enabling conversations in the Catholic community. They are, however, again to be clear, only a part of our mission. Our primary mission is journalism, gathering news and analysis on issue of importance to Catholics and other faith traditions.

We will bring comments back just as soon as we can, but it won't be fast enough for many. For that I apologize, but there is no easy fix to the problems that come with opening a news website like NCR to comments. Despite what many say and think, there is no single technological solution. No filtering system exists that will screen out the nasty things people will say to one another. There is no validation system that will keep out the trolls and people with ill-intent who are determined to get it. No system is a guarantee against people who just exercise plain old bad judgment.

Technology has advanced since 2006 when we first began a commenting community at NCR (and I have been a moderator since then, so I have seen a thing or two, let me tell you). We have a few options that we are exploring and many readers have made suggestions to us. We are looking at Talk, the system under the Coral Project that the New York Times and Washington Post use, but it isn't just a plug-and-play website component. Did you know the New York Times has 50 full-time people who moderate comments? The Washington Post, too, has a whole team devoted to that one aspect of their news organization. We don't have those kinds of resources. I talked with the publisher of a news site that was using Civil Comments, our old system, and they were getting ready to use Talk. She has three folks whose job will include moderating the 60-70 comments they get per day. On a typical day, NCR was receiving 300-400 comments. On a busy day that doubles.

As editor I am left with a judgment to make: where do I devote my limited resources? My first choice will always be to the newsgathering side of our operation.

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There are other commenting forums available. You can leave comments on the official NCR Facebook page. You can respond to NCR on our Twitter feed. A group of NCR readers started a private Facebook page, called, I think, "Homeless Commenters of NCR," but you have to be invited into that group.

Today I am launching another alternative, based on the old-fashioned letters to the editor format. Send me your thoughts and ideas, reactions and responses. I will collect them, curate them and every Friday afternoon, I will post a collection to the NCR Today blog.

Just like the old-fashioned letters to the editors, I will not be posting everything sent to me and submissions will have to conform to the rules, but I pledge to do my best to represent the full range of letters that I receive. Here are the rules:

- Letters to the editor should be submitted to comments@ncronline.org.
- Letters to the editor should be limited to 250 words.
- First consideration is given to letters written in response to an article that has appeared on NCRonline.org.
- Letters must include your name, street address, city, state and zip code.
    - We will publish your name and city, state, but not your full address.
- Please include a daytime telephone number where we can reach you.
    - We will not publish your phone number. It may be used for verification.
- We can't guarantee publication of all letters, but you can be assured that your comments will receive careful consideration.
- Published letters may be edited for length and style.

These are the same rules that have guided the letters to the editor column in our print edition for 53 years, so I hope they work here, too.

Two things to note:

- Keep letters to 250 words. Sorry, folks, I just can't handle more than that.
- You have to give me your real name. Anonymous comments will be used very rarely and only under specific circumstances.

To get things started, today I will share with you some of the comments I have received about comments. I will break the rule about using real names because these folks didn't know I would be using them in this context. But from now on, all letters must include real names.



Dear Editor:

How sad ...

How sad that there are no more "Comments." I fully understand NCR's situation. (Do I?!)

Name & shame: is it possible to publish 10 examples of right/left wing "comments" so that they/we feel the extent of the need for their censoring? [**Editor's Note:** I think folks understand what is appropriate and what is not without me listing nasty things.]

In the neck of the woods where I am, far south of the Rio Grande, some of the things we have to skip in comments are mainly from the Right: bitter-dour-holier than thou stuff. The Left always seems to be more humorous, more ironic (quite different from being funny/sarcastic) in their opinions.

Until we meet again — in "Comments," of course!

Comments discontinued

I will be watching for "the solution," and invoke a Leonard Cohen Line — "May all your work go well."

In respect to the "disaffiliation issue," (See Study asks: Why are young Catholics going, going, gone?) may I suggest that the "taproot" of it all may be located in historical fact that the Nouvelle Theologie, which I feel was initiated by the

publication of works by Pierre Teilhard de Chardin and his coterie of supporters in mid to late 1950s was blanketed by Jesuit and Vatican authorities (cf. Monitum 1962).

I have spent a lifetime in study of Teilhard's writings; one of the most pertinent signs of "new growth" would be for Pope Francis to publicly revoke the Monitum, and perhaps even declare Teilhard a Doctor of the Church. (**Editor's Note:** We've got a story coming this weekend about this topic.)

The greatly respected Dominican theologian Reginald Garrigou-Lagrange asked the question, "Where is The Nouvelle Theologie leading us?" and conventional academic opinion rushed to judgement with the notion that his implication was that the 20th century theology train was in danger of going off-track — so the Darwinian correction has not been applied, and very few young people are interested in a ride that in Teilhardian analogy will end in "a shower of sparks."

The loss of comments

Greetings. My wife and I live in a remote and beautiful part of Scotland, 30 miles from the nearest Catholic church. Being avid readers, our main contact with our faith is via The Book and the internet.

National Catholic Reporter and The Tablet help us keep up to date with affairs in the wider church. We miss the comments column in NCR. I do understand that articles can attract the best and the worst of comments. But the very best of correspondence can be inspiring. I look forward to their return. It is a slower response, but we find the Tablet's letters to the editor column a very suitable response to articles. This gives the editor control of publication.

We continue to enjoy access to NCRonline. Thank you.

The elimination of comments

Congratulations — eliminating comments is a brave but beneficial move. People who really want online discussion can set up their own groups on their own computers with their own software. To go on encouraging off the wall reactions and insults, misunderstandings and meanness has brought us where we are in the matter of civil discourse in this country.

There are other ways to go about it. Thank you for focusing on ideas rather than on comments ... that can be expressed in other ways with a greater degree of rationality.

Comments removed

Msgr. Harry Schlitt told me that NCR had a review of his book now, so I went online to share it with our people: we have two book clubs, and Harry hopes one of them might want to use his book for their focus. [**Editor's Note:** The review of Msgr. Schlitt's book, *I'll Never Tell: Odyssey of a Rock & Roll Priest*, is in the Jan. 12-25 print issue and will be posted online in the next week or so.]

In my search, I noticed that you had removed the comments section, and read your explanation: you did exactly the right thing, in my opinion. Today, so many people use the new media (e.g., Facebook, websites, emails, etc.) to spew vitriol all over the place, and it can be very discouraging.

In my former parish, we had to remove the "Prayer Requested" portion because people abused it by putting in inappropriate items ("Let us pray for the death of the pope") and by using it to promote bad things (such as porn).

I manage our parish Facebook page, and when people get out of line, I block them from being able to post anything in the future. It may sound terrible, but I don't want our parishioners subjected to anger and lava and hand grenades every time they come looking for something spiritual, information, or inspiring.

Grateful for you and your colleagues.

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