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A blog entry about blogs

by John L. Allen Jr.

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As a rule of thumb, I don't respond when people go on-line to offer either criticism or praise of something I've written, or something I've said on TV or radio. I've already had my say, and anyway, the focus ought to be on the story rather than the story-teller.

Recently, however, I tossed a throw-away line about blogs into the middle of a column on an unrelated topic. That line made the rounds, and some people either still wonder what I meant (in which case they've asked for clarification) or they're pretty sure they know what I meant (and some in that crowd want an apology.)

Since this subject indirectly connects to some of the themes in *The Future Church*, I thought I'd take it up briefly here.

To recap, my "All Things Catholic" column two weeks ago was about the next generation of Catholic leaders, meaning priests, sisters, theologians, lay activists and so on. I wrote that I'd recently had some insight on the subject while out on the lecture circuit, and, as an aside, I opined that there's no substitute for a live audience to gauge what real people are thinking. The blogosphere, I added, often seems populated by what Homer Simpson once described as "alcoholics, the unemployed, angry loners"??

I had thought the reference to Homer Simpson might be enough to flag that line as a joke, but a couple bloggers (so far, I've had e-mails from two) obviously didn't find it funny, demanding that I apologize for the slight to their craft.

For the record, I didn't really have in mind "bloggers," in the sense of people who create blogs, feed them with content, and moderate their on-line discussions. As regular readers of mine know, over the years I've often cited the work of bloggers such as Rocco Palmo, Amy Welborn, and Fr. John Zuhlsdorf,

as well as collective endeavors such as the Commonweal blog. They're all tremendous gifts to Catholic conversation, and if any of them felt slighted, I am sorry.

What I actually had in mind were instead those "comments" sections you often find at the end of blog entries, which are legendary for veering wildly off-topic, and which often seem to elicit a degree of rhetorical viciousness to which most people simply wouldn't succumb in real-life conversation. That's what I meant by blogs not representing the *vox populi*; I simply refuse to believe that most people, most of the time, are quite that angry.

Here's how all this connects the future of the Catholic church.

The Internet is both the leading symbol of the globalized world as well as one of its primary drivers. In 1995, according to the Web site "Internet World Stats," there were 16 million Internet users in the world, representing .04 percent of the global population; as of June 2007, there were 1.13 billion users, or 17.2 percent of the world, remarkable growth in little more than a decade. According to the Worldwide Online Population Forecast, by 2011 roughly 1.8 billion people will be logging on, representing 22 percent of the global population — almost one-quarter of all people on earth.

All this can't help but affect the church. The growth of the Internet, blogs in particular, is aggressively democratizing Catholic conversation — providing an outlet for alternative points of view, and in some cases becoming the meeting place for what are virtually "cyber-parishes," or at least small Christian communities in cyberspace. We are an ever more global family of faith, and the Internet allows that family to communicate in real time, so that a Catholic concern in remote northeast India can be picked up by bloggers in the Philippines, Argentina, and Dubuque, thereby giving tangible expression to the notion of solidarity.

All that sounds great, and it is. The shadow side, however, is that the polarization and tribalism we all know from other spheres of Catholic life are also being replicated on-line, this time shorn of the natural limits imposed by the conventions of face-to-face communication. In other words, cyberspace can become just another forum for Catholics to yell at each other, with the nastiness turbo-charged by distance and anonymity.

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The extent to which blogs and the other features of the new digital landscape help to carry the church into the future, rather than keeping the church stuck in its present pattern of division, thus depends upon how Catholics choose to use them — and right now, there are some worrying trends. That observation, I suppose, was the background to my (admittedly sloppy) citation of the Homer Simpson line cited above.

In other words: I come to praise blogs, not to bury them!

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