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Commentary on commenting

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NCR Today

In teaching a recent "Social Media" class, I reminded students that comments to an online post can contain the real news of a story, insights the author may have missed and a spirit of genuine community. Or they can be a cesspool of misinformation, heinous attacks and anonymous mudslinging.

I see both in the comments here at NCR and other Catholic and religion blogs and online sites. So it was with interest that I noticed three recent instances of comment moderation:

1. Deacon Greg Kandra of "The Deacon's Bench" blog at patheos announced a few weeks ago that he and his blog would be "Taking a vacation from vitriol" for the near future--or perhaps permanently. He pointed out the break was necessary for his own spiritual health:

"On some days, keeping track of the torrent of comments has become a full-time job, and I've found repeatedly that the combined badgering, sniping and vitriol too often create an environment that can only be called toxic. I just don't have the time or mental energy to deal with it."

2. Father Jim Martin, SJ, has repeatedly had to warn his Facebook friends to be charitable, avoid snottiness and give everyone the benefit of the doubt. He recently reported that he had to delete 25 comments on a discussion about Sister Margaret Farley, RSM. Says Martin:

"Is it really that hard to stick to the arguments and not be cruel or vindictive or snotty? If Sister Margaret can say (twice) in her statement that she appreciates the work of the CDF then surely her supporters can begin with the same generosity. And if the Vatican can refrain from ad hominem attacks on Sister Margaret (that is, attacking her person rather than what she has written) then those who agree with the Notification can do the same.'

3. On a more positive note, Religion News Service blogger Jana Riess (a Mormon) recently announced that RNS was making it easier to comment on her blog, by removing the registration and password requirement. Her rationale: that "frank discussion about religion and other topics can help to create a better-informed society." She rarely deletes comments, unless they attack other commenters:

"My policy as it evolved was that it was fine for people to call me names, pray out loud for my excommunication, or basically behave like trolls to my face. I can take it; anyone who writes publicly about religion has to expect a lot of trollish nastiness, sad to say. But I won't tolerate comments that gang up on other commenters at my blog. This needs to be a safe place for readers."

On the one hand, I understand Deacon Kandra's frustration and the need for Father Jim's warnings. It is true that the anonymity and immediacy of this new medium makes it easier to engage in behavior many of us would never consider if we had to face the person we were talking to.

(As an aside: Online commenters who threaten violence or defame others may be prosecuted, as this story in Australia points out.)

On the other hand, one of the true benefits of online and social media are the opportunities for two-way conversation. While I agree with the need for some guidelines (NCR's are here), is it too much to ask that grown-ups act like grown-ups? Or at the very least, that Christians act like Christians?

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