

## **The Catholic blogosphere, challenges and opportunities**

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The blogosphere is as old as the internet. There are well over 100 million blogs according to a 2008 Technorati estimate. Once the domain of computer geeks and tech nerds, the blogosphere is now respectably populated by soccer moms, fashion conscious teen-agers, political dissenters, pyjama-clad college students and the Cardinal Archbishop of Boston among others. Most mainstream newspapers use blogs now, and I imagine most people in this room have a blog or at least a Twitter account. As more and more people have flocked to the internet to discuss topics dear to their hearts, a lively, loud and argumentative Catholic blogosphere, which has challenged bishops, magnified Church controversies, helped attract new faithful and put off others in turn, has flourished.

Interactive, easy to use and speedy, the blog provides an accessible medium both for author and reader. It gives voice to those who might not necessarily be heard. Because of links, referrals and blog-rolls, groups of blogs can develop into interlinked and interconnected communities which share interests and give refuge to those who feel misunderstood or disconnected.

And yet the blogosphere continues to be viewed with suspicion, even hostility within both the traditional media and within the Church, where blogs are often seen as hurtful, aggressive, angry "voices from below", engaged in polemic, gossip mongering and scandal. The Catholic blogosphere been described as a wild-west, where barroom brawls are commonplace and mob-lynchings not unheard of, while Catholic bloggers have been described as a sort of Catholic Taliban, self-appointed defenders of the Magisterium.

My own early experiences with the blogosphere were overwhelmingly negative. In 2008 I interviewed the now notorious SSPX Bishop Richard Williamson.

When our story broke in February 2008, so did the waves of vitriol in the internet. Although some blogs offered legitimate criticism of the way in which the story was reported and written, most of them were filled with personal invective. Countless pages on the web questioned whether I could really be a "true friend of the Catholic faith" while others made slurs on the basis of my appearance. Much of what was said is unrepeatable here today. To give an indication of the nastiness I met, I haven't googled myself since then, which, given the size of journalists' egos, is saying something.

Just as the people of God are varied, so also is the Catholic blogosphere. You have blogs which help your prayer life, others like *GodzDogz*, a blog run by the English Dominican students help to explain tenets of the Catholic faith. There is Rocco Palmo's *Whispers in the Loggia* which covers Church news, curial appointments and John Allen Jr's *National Catholic Reporter* blog which offers in-depth analysis of Church affairs. There are predominantly liturgical blogs, like Father John Zuhlsdorf's *What does the prayer really say?* and blogs which tell conversion or vocation stories. There are group blogs, like the one run by America Magazine or by my own newspaper, which cover a multitude of different areas of discussion, from atheism to human consciousness, from the founding of Ordinariates to saints, from film reviews to bioethics. Then there are those blogs, like the Hermeneutic of Continuity, which are run by active parish priests and nuns, men and women in the trenches, which cover a multitude of subjects, from advertising discussion groups, pilgrimages and talks, to offering criticism, theology and news analysis.

This year, at a talk given at New Orleans, Archbishop Claudio Celli expressed his concerns about the challenges facing the Catholic blogosphere. Drawing from examples in politics, he said that blogs could lead to increasing polarisation within the Church, in which people only engage with those media which reflect their already entrenched views.

He said: "I would be worried that a similar phenomenon could be emerging in the world of Catholic media, especially in the blogosphere, where often it seems not enough for protagonists to propose their own views and beliefs but where they tend also to attack the arguments, and even the person, of those who disagree with them. It is natural that debates about faith and morals should be full of conviction and passion but there is a growing risk that some forms of expression are damaging the unity of the Church and, moreover, are unlikely to draw the curious and the seekers to a desire to learn about the Church and its message."

It is true that the tone in the blogosphere is often angry-and sometimes not without cause. People have turned to blogs because they have not been heard, because their concerns are not being listened to or even taken seriously. If their criticism of local bishops is uncharitable, it is possibly because there is a real rupture in the communion of the Church that needs to be addressed. I know of more than one case where Church authorities have attempted to shut down blogs that are critical, using arguably the same sort of aggressive tactics they accuse the bloggers of using.

Isolation and polarisation are not problems which affect only the new media. One need but look at the United States, where the *National Catholic Reporter* and the *National Catholic Register* show the deep fault-lines of a polarised Church, to see that old media is similarly affected. The blogosphere merely amplifies and speeds up human communication. Because of the speed there is sometimes a disconnect, between pressing the button to publish a post or a comment and the reality that such a comment could be hurtful or even irresponsible.

During the Holy Father's recent visit to Britain, several prominent British Catholic bloggers were given access to the media centre where they were able to use the facilities and interact with journalists. Like everybody from the official Church bodies, the Catholic bloggers also wanted the visit to be a success. The moment they became part of the conversation and part of the common

endeavour, they were able to be genuinely positive about the Pope's visit-and the joy they were projecting seemed all the more genuine because these bloggers are not afraid of giving criticism where criticism is due. By treating the bloggers as members of the media, the Church authorities' were effectively saying that these voices were worth respecting and worth listening to. And because someone was listening, it gave bloggers the incentive suddenly to be more careful about the tone of their posts.

Rocco Palmo, of *Whispers in the Loggia*, describes a similar experience. He says he had three readers until his blog took off and he found out his name was being passed around the 2005 papal conclave on a napkin. When he learned this, his first instinct was to kill the blog off, but he persevered. But he says, the watershed moment came a bit later, when he was leaked a letter which was being circulated calling for a vote of no confidence in Cardinal Edward Egan of New York. He published the letter and received a great deal of criticism. It was the realisation that what he was saying mattered that helped him become a more responsible blogger.

For the Church, blogs can be an incredible boon because their reach extends far further than that of the traditional Catholic media. *Whispers in the Loggia* has between 90,000 to 100,000 visits a week, while the highly respected Jesuit *America Magazine* has a print circulation of 45,000 --it also has excellent blogs. While *Whispers* and other Catholic blogs can be stumbled upon while browsing on the internet in the privacy and comfort of one's own home, access to traditional Catholic media often requires a visit to the local Church, an active subscription, a phone call.

It is important to remember that not all bloggers are journalists and not all journalists are bloggers. For journalists, Catholic journalists in particular, the internet and the blogosphere come with particular challenges. Because speed is essential in the blogosphere, there is a temptation to break stories before they are fully verified or to build up stories based on outrage. The success of a blog is

sometimes measured on "hits" alone. The more controversial a topic, the more likely it is to harvest hits for a blog-post, because search engines react to certain key words and other bloggers are more likely to link to a controversial post. Here the temptation is to generate controversy just for the sake of more web-traffic.

Journalists' blogs are best when they reflect a journalist's expertise. Most bloggers don't have the time to look at news stories in depth, or scour the web-though some do it pretty thoroughly-so journalists can offer analysis and new developments on stories that are being discussed on the web. Catholic journalists have an advantage over their peers in the mainstream media-they are specialists on the workings of the Church and can therefore offer a place to which mainstream journalists can turn when Catholicism dominates the news. The blogs' informal format and lively discussion can also contribute to interpersonal relationships between journalists, their readers and their fellow bloggers.

While the Pope was in Britain, it was the personal aspect of the blogs and the sense of community and interconnectedness that thrives in the blogosphere that helped the enthusiasm spread. The Catholic Herald were live-blogging the papal events, live-blogging means you offer a running, blow-by-blow account of what is happening. We were also live-tweeting, which is similar to live-blogging but on twitter. We found from the feed-back we received that the live-blogs were useful for people who were at work and wanted to follow the papal visit without interfering with the things they had to do. With the live-blog they were able to check every few minutes and still have the sense of following the Pope's visit in real time.

At a time when trust in institutions from the big newspapers to the Church is seriously undermined, blogs and micro-blogs like Twitter give people a sense of a personal connection with the source of their news and opinions. The blogosphere has vibrancy and gives a sense of what people believe,

something that has perhaps been lost a bit in the traditional media.

If the Church can find a way of harnessing the power of non-journalist bloggers, who write about the Church and the faith because they are compelled to, through love or passion, then it will be in possession of a very strong tool for evangelisation, namely the witness of the lay faithful.

One blogger to emerge from the Pope's visit to Britain is a young woman who goes by the internet handle of Pilgrim Claz. Her blog is enthusiastic, encouraging and positive. During the build-up to the papal visit, when much of the Catholic press was focussed on all the problems of organisation which seemed to spell a disaster for the Pope's visit, her blog sounded a note of hopeful, positive Christianity, but without sounding forced or phoney.

In an age when people are cynical about the messages they receive from both the hierarchical Church and the traditional media and are used to spin the Catholic blogosphere can offer a refreshing antidote. Genuine discussion and genuine witness, by real people.

Pope Benedict, during his visit to Britain called on the lay faithful to "not only to be examples of faith in public, but also to put the case for the promotion of faith's wisdom and vision in the public forum. Society today needs clear voices which propose our right to live, not in a jungle of self-destructive and arbitrary freedoms, but in a society which works for the true welfare of its citizens and offers them guidance and protection in the face of their weakness and fragility."

Blogs offer a unique opportunity to reach out to others, to put the Catholic case, but it is important to remember that the blogosphere will only ever be as good as the Christians the Church shapes.