

Dangers to Christian way of being in digital world

Heidi Schlumpf | Apr. 22, 2011



(Pat Marrin)

Bless me, Father, for I have sinned. It's been a while since my last confession, but I have to get something off my chest. I once left a not-so-nice anonymous comment online.

I was innocently perusing some knitting blogs when up popped a post about possible legislation requiring homeschoolers to pass proficiency tests in the subjects they taught their children. The blogger/homeschooler was most decidedly against such government intrusion. The problem was, though, that her blog entry was riddled with grammatical errors.

Such irony begged to be pointed out by a commenter, but no one had yet done so. So I quickly typed a message noting that her apparent lack of grammar skills might not make her the best person to teach English to her children. To be fair, I added, I probably wasn't qualified to teach calculus or chemistry either, and that such common deficiencies were probably what prompted said legislation.

When it came time to hit "send" for my polite-but-still-somewhat-snarky comment, I chose the option to remain anonymous. It was just easier. The tone of her original post didn't suggest she might be open to differing opinions, so why risk a nasty reply?

As it turned out, every other commenter agreed wholeheartedly with the knitting homeschooler, so my comment just got lost in the virtual pats on the back. But I felt guilty for a long time for saying something electronically that I would never say in person.

One needn't be a Buddhist to believe in karma, and I got mine last year while my husband and I were in China adopting our daughter. I was blogging about it for friends and family back home and had put up a perfunctory post to let everyone know we had indeed received her. I would write more later, I promised.

The congratulatory comments poured in, but so did one that labeled my list of things I wanted to remember about that day as "amazingly unemotional" and "cold and detached," adding, "I hope it's just poor writing and not a lack of love in your hearts."

The author's name? Anonymous.

Now, I don't mean to downplay the feelings of pain, judgment and crushed self-esteem that my anonymous comment to the homeschooler may have caused, but hurling insults at someone who just hours earlier received her adopted child? That seems pretty heartless and, well, cold.

I wish I could say I let it roll off my back. But it wasn't that easy, given my heightened emotions, not to mention tremendous jetlag. In my reply to the commenter, I did note that if he or she was a waiting adoptive parent having a bad day because it was hard to see others united with their children, I would keep that person in my prayers. Otherwise, "get a life," I said.

Dozens of friends, family and strangers came to my defense in the comment section of that post, and more than a few scolded "Anonymous" for his or her callousness and uncaring.

As I held the daughter we had waited almost five years for, I wondered what kind of society we were bringing her into. What kind of person can feel justified saying something so hateful? Would this person say such a thing to my face? Or to the face of someone he or she knows in real life?

Probably not.

The Internet provides a veil of anonymity that can be convenient if you want medical information you're embarrassed to ask your doctor or are curious about whether your high school flame aged well or not. But it also allows people to use pornography, engage in virtual "affairs," spread lies and misinformation, sabotage another person's or company's image, and spew all kinds of hateful commentary -- all while remaining, for the most part, anonymous.

This, I believe, is dangerous -- and sinful. Just as criminal activity is more likely when it can be hidden, so are normally well-mannered people more likely to take cheap shots, call others names, jump to conclusions and ratchet up their disagreements to World War III-level when they can do so anonymously. I see it every day in online comments in everything from *The Washington Post* to *The Huffington Post*.

I also see it in the comment sections of online Catholic publications, including *NCR*'s. A group of people who by definition value charity apparently think it's OK to throw it out the window when they get into heated arguments with someone they don't know and can hide their identity from.

Whether or not to allow anonymous (or quasi-anonymous) comments is a tough call for a publication. If you don't, you risk lower readership and are guaranteed lower interactivity. If you allow them, however, you end up contributing to the already toxic level of discourse in our culture.

Although he didn't address anonymous commenting directly in this year's message for World Communications Day, Pope Benedict XVI did point out that there is "a Christian way of being present in the digital world: This takes the form of a communication which is honest and open, responsible and respectful of others."

Perhaps it's time we all confessed our online indiscretions and, as penance, agreed to put our name to our comments and keep them as charitable as we would if we were saying them in person.

[Heidi Schlumpf is the author of *While We Wait: Spiritual and Practical Advice for Those Trying to Adopt* (ACTA Publications).]

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