

## Loving our online neighbors

Kate Childs Graham | Dec. 30, 2008



Young Voices  
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This past year, I have had a myriad of

responses to my online writing. I have been praised, criticized, and sometimes even demeaned. Without doubt, I understood at the outset of my Internet expedition that by writing on gender, sexuality and the Catholic Church I was opening myself up for criticism, and hopefully at times, praise. However, what I did not expect was how I would react to the comments or blogs people posted in response to what I had written.

When I was praised, I felt as if I had received an "A+" on a paper. When I was criticized, I wanted a chance to engage in dialogue. And when I was demeaned or attacked -- well, let's just say there have been several nights where I have found it hard to shut my eyes with insults about my opinion, my life and my family running through my head. In this online forum that I had always believed to be impersonal, I was taking things very personally. And this has led me to examine what my faith and my conscience tell me about online ethics.

People thousands of miles away or a few blocks down the street, people who I have never met or those whom I have known for a lifetime, people who have similar ideologies and others with whom I staunchly disagree, these are the people who have reacted to my writing. These are my online neighbors.

When Jesus called us to love our neighbor, the concept of "neighbor" was indeed infinite. However, never before in history have our neighbors, their thoughts and opinions, hopes and dreams, been as accessible as now. And what I have learned is that sitting behind a computer screen does not excuse us from loving our neighbor; rather, it calls us to expand whom we thought of as neighbor. Our faith calls us to remember that when we are commenting or writing online that across the world or across the street sits our neighbor to whom we are responding.

Not only is our notion of neighbor ever expanding as a result of the Internet, our concept of church is also expanding. There are hundreds of thousands of blogs, Web sites, and online news sources in as many languages as one can count that claim a Catholic identity. And what we can discover by searching the Net for even a few minutes is that these Catholic sites do not all agree on every issue. The proverbial tent of the Catholic church no longer includes just our local parish or community, it also includes millions of Catholics who are trying to uncover what it means to be Catholic -- and they are doing so online.

While the Internet can bring us together and help us embrace the diversity of the faithful, it can also foster divisiveness. I have felt this division personally as writers on several blogs, my neighbors -- both Catholic and non-Catholic -- have questioned my faith. I have also been on the other side of the table, criticizing my online neighbors of the religious right for flooding comment boxes with what I have called "right-wing propaganda." It is easy to do, especially when your neighbor is so intangible, but our Catholic tradition shows us that the easy route is not always the best.

The Internet offers many opportunities to people of all faiths, providing new forums for dialogue and debate and resource centers, among other things. On the other hand, the online world gives us many challenges. We are challenged to see our neighbor in the faceless voice of an online writer. We are called upon to demonstrate compassion when entering into online dialogue. We are trusted to learn how to use these technologies to come together as a community of believers and overcome division.

**NCR e-mail alerts** expect to be criticized (and hope to be praised) for what I write online. And indeed, all into online dialogue -- whether I agree with them or not. My hope is that our faith and the faiths of others will guide us to use compassion online, always seeing our neighbor through the pixels of a computer screen.

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