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#thebutterflyeffect

Phyllis Zagano | Mar. 26, 2014 Just Catholic

The crowded and often nasty Catholic blogosphere predicts schism in the church. The right is getting "righter" and the left is getting "lefter." Is there a center? Can it hold?

Social media, such as it is, means anyone with a computer or a tablet or a smartphone can send and receive electronic messages. That means anyone can broadcast and anyone can receive. There are no fact-checkers.

Which brings us to systems theory. Along with other disciplines, sociology and science see systems as either open or closed. To oversimplify things: Open systems can be influenced and closed systems cannot be influenced. A scientist may look at the universe and all creation as an open system. Similarly, a sociologist may look at the church, in all its members, as an open system.

Scientists will argue that the smallest change can influence the entire universe. They point to the "butterfly effect" -- a theoretical concept of a scientist named Edward Lorenz, who famously asked, "Predictability: Does the Flap of a Butterfly's wings in Brazil Set Off a Tornado in Texas? [1]" The short answer: Lorenz found that when something in the system acts, the system changes. Maybe not cause a tornado, exactly, but at least affect its timing or precise trajectory. However, since there is no way of knowing how many butterflies there are or which among them are flapping their wings, nothing can be predicted exactly.

Such reflects the tension in the church today. Whereas a certain cadre of folks sees the church as a closed and unchanging system, the new pope on the block apparently does not. Francis embraces an open church where discussion reigns and the levels of discussants vary widely. While he has not only opened the windows, Francis has flung open the front and back doors to the effects of uncounted metaphorical butterflies all over the world.

Those metaphorical butterflies are increasingly polarized, and they are flapping all over the Internet. Whether on Facebook, Twitter or your local Catholic blog, they threaten the system.

And they truly threaten chaos, not simply change, by encouraging polarization and schism. Electronic attitudes are increasingly hardening, and commentary is increasingly sharp. The angry "right" claims absolute knowledge of what is "Catholic" and what is "catholic." The angry "left" is wrapped tightly around what it sees as reform while calling Pope Benedict XVI "the Rat."

Attitude is the least of it. Each side has its "facts." Yet when a piece of "information" goes viral on the Internet, there is little chance of checking whether it is true or false. The older paranoia about electronic lies (the moon landing was staged in Hollywood) has now morphed into a worldwide warning. Much of what is out there electronically flapping away is quite simply false.

Still, in the church, battling left-right views claim their own truths. Each stacks its own pile of facts on its end of the see-saw. Surely, discussion, conversation and analysis are each and all good, but there is a lot out there that is patently incorrect yet used to support views on both sides. Therein lies the risk. Therein lies the pain.

Lately, Pope Francis has taken aim at the dangers of unfettered media, some of which, in his words [2], "take the road of lies: ... disinformation, slander and defamation." For Pope Francis, as for the rest of us, the most dangerous is disinformation, which he points out includes "telling half-truths, the part that is most convenient to me, and not saying the other half."

The tailored half-truths that replace facts and logic in argumentation belie the intent of they who present them. No matter the topic -- access to Communion for the divorced and remarried (but not annulled) is the question *du jour* -- the honest art of discussion, conversation and analysis has fallen to the effects of thousands of Internet butterfly wings, each flapping for its own audience, each thereby fanning the winds of positions that threaten to rip apart the fabric of the church.

This is not new, nor will many of the 1.2 billion Catholics out there even know about it. But as the flapping continues at recognizable cross-purposes, the winds will build and howl in opposite directions. The tornado may have been coming anyway, but this one looks as if it is going to be especially destructive.

[Phyllis Zagano is senior research associate-in-residence at Hofstra University and winner of the 2014 Isaac Hecker Award for Social Justice. She will speak April 5 at St. Ursula Academy in Cincinnati; May 6 at St. Francis Xavier Church in New York City; and June 9 at Holy Family Church, South Pasadena, Calif. From June 9 to July 8, she will conduct a free online seminar about women in the diaconate based on the books *Women Deacons: Past, Present, Future* [3] and *Ordination of Women to the Diaconate in the Eastern Churches* [4]. Seminar registration opens April 21 at http://people.hofstra.edu/phyllis_zagano/MOOS.html [5]]

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