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Giving up the news for Lent

Heidi Schlumpf | Feb. 27, 2012 NCR Today

A number of friends and colleagues have bowed out of Facebook as their Lenten discipline this year. No doubt social media can be a time-waster, but they can also be important forms of communication. Even more intriguing to me is that a couple of friends have mentioned giving up another form of media?the news.

Such a proposal should be anathema to a news-junkie journalist like me, but I find myself agreeing that a news fast might make spiritual sense.

Much of what is presented as ?news? today is actually analysis or opinion, and to say that the tone is contentious is like pointing out that the sky is blue. While being informed is important, is it really necessary to follow the hourly ups and downs of every presidential candidate? Or to dissect the Vatican?s latest announcement in minute detail? Or to read every nasty comment to a favorite blogger?s latest missive?

The saying, ?junk in, junk out? may apply here. Just as some relationships can be toxic, so can much of the partisan, argumentative, sometimes nasty and ill-informed ?content? that passes for news (not at NCR of course!).

At the very least it makes me cranky, depressed and not very charitable to those with other opinions.

Even when news analysis and opinion is well-researched, carefully written and respectful (as it is in this publication), the resulting debate about it?shared in comments or via social media?can degenerate into a negativity that borders on sinful.

For me, this problem is even sadder for church-related news than for its secular counterpart. Beating up one?s opponent in the name of God is not only painful for insiders, it?s bad PR for organized religion. ?See these Christians: how they love to fight each other,? writes America Magazine Associate Editor Kevin Clarke in his Ash Wednesday piece for the Washington Post called, ?Lent in a Time of a Catholic Culture War [1].?

I share Clarke?s despair. The Catholic culture wars, most recently over the contraception mandate, can shake my faith in my fellow Christians, if not in God. Even the disagreements among NCR writers, bloggers and columnists have been heated over this issue. As a feminist, it has been hard for me to hear moderate and liberal Catholics say it's "regrettable" that the "religious liberty" issue is women's health.

Passion is a good thing, and strong feelings about issues that matter is to be expected. But how many columns, blog posts, tweets and comments about ?women-hating bishops? or a ?religion-hating president? can I read before my own heart fills with hate?

My job does not allow me to abstain from the news, since I?m paid to write about it. But I do think taking a break from the culture war would help bring some peace to my own soul. Luckily, so much positive spiritual reading ?including some great columnists in NCR?can take its place.

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[1] http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/guest-voices/post/lent-in-a-time-of-a-catholic-culture-war/2012/02/21/gIQAR9u6SR_blog.html