NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

In search of the civilized in today's anonymous culture

Joan Chittister | Mar. 9, 2012 From Where I Stand

This column is late. Months late. Years late, actually. But I admit that it writes itself in my head almost every day. This month, there were two separate situations that require it be said rather than simply thought.

Last week, Rush Limbaugh, popular voice of far-right politics, used his position on the airwaves to insult, label and pronounce on the sexual motivations of a young Georgetown law school student who testified on behalf of the coverage of contraceptive medicine in national health care insurance plans.

And he did it not once, but at least three times. It was not, obviously, a slip of the tongue. This was a personal attack of precise aim.

Then this week, on another subject but with a similar tone, students at Columbia University, Barnard College's sister school and one of the country's premier educational institutions, raged online at *Newsweek*'s "The Daily Beast" about the unworthiness of the women of Barnard to have the honor of President Barack Obama as their graduation speaker. The insults hurled at Barnard, a woman's college since 1889 and a partner school of Columbia, were every bit as sexual and sexist, as degrading and as vehement as Limbaugh's.

At least Limbaugh didn't hide behind false screen names as did the respondents to the Barnard issue, who chose to be vile rather than accountable for their free speech.

Like Limbaugh, the students of Columbia -- many of them women -- who resent the fact that President Obama agreed to do the graduation address at Barnard rather than accept similar invitations to Columbia chose invective rather than analysis to register their reactions to the situation. They and the screaming respondents who answered their tirades with tirades of their own simply abandoned all pretense of intellectual development or rational response.

It is clear in both cases that "free speech" has reached a new low. The question is, Whose fault is that, really?

And the answer is that there are culprits aplenty, it seems.

First, anonymity is surely a factor. To allow people to scream into the dark of the public arena under the guise of namelessness gives the gift of night to those whose rude or violent company would almost certainly ban them from public discourse. Sociological studies, too, have often linked the rise of crime to the rise of the anonymity. With the move from small rural areas of settled populations to transient urban areas, the ability to function unknown became public sport.

Second, group size itself, as well as mobility, masks identification even when people appear to be operating in public. To steal from a village neighbor who will certainly know you is clearly untenable. In Small Town USA, there was a time when anyone in town felt authorized to correct a child for fighting on the way home from school, talking too loud in the movie or running down the elder people on the street. After all, everybody knew everybody. They could call you by name. There was no such thing as "getting away with it." Now with the

populations of metropolitan areas counted in the millions, the likelihood of being recognized by the neighbors as the thief or rowdy or attacker is slim to none.

Third, the Internet itself is now a factor, as well. Under cover of false IDs, the Internet has become the dark alley of contemporary communication. Invective, pornographic language and verbal attacks without accountability have been unleashed in the name of free speech.

Finally, the sinking level of public professionalism in journalism is itself in question. No newsmagazine or newspaper would publish as letters to the editor what now passes for commentary on the best of websites. But on the cyberspace publications, it runs rampant. Without monitors to remove the level of screaming, innuendo, insult and unrestrained misinformation or vitriol, this kind of smut now passes for commentary on blogs, articles and sensible arguments of any ilk or position. Attracting people to one of a thousand similar websites becomes a kind of linguistic competition red in tooth and claw. The bloodier and more bawdry the better. Sick speech spews into the atmosphere like coal dust into the ozone layer, rupturing a level of civilization we once took for granted but now can only hope to see outweighed by reason and civility as we read.

And so, lowering the social bar is lowering the level of American culture, the impact of American civilization, the quality of American thought and the elegance of American speech. It is a high price to pay for readership of an inelegant nature.

I saw an editor's note just as I began to write these thoughts down this time. It is from a website called "Reader Supported News." It reads:

> We are concerned about a recent drift towards vitriol in the rsn reader comments section. There is a fine line between moderation and censorship. No one likes a harsh or confrontational forum atmosphere. At the same time everyone wants to be able to express themselves freely. We'll start by encouraging good judgement. If that doesn't work we'll have to ramp up the moderation.
>
> 1. General guidelines: avoid personal attacks on other forum members; avoid remarks that are ethnically derogatory; do not advocate violence, or any illegal activity.
>
> Remember that making the world better begins with responsible action.

From where I stand, it seems to me that all of cyberspace might be well-served to do the same before civil discourse in the United States is a thing of the past and literary barbarism a thing of the eternal present. A very sad state to imagine, indeed.

Source URL (retrieved on *12/19/2013 - 14:09*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/where-i-stand/search-civilized-todays-anonymous-culture