



# CATHOLICS ONLINE

COGS IN A DIVINE WHIRLIGIG

BY ELIZABETH SCALIA



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Talk to almost any Catholic writer who blogs, and you will hear a similar story:

The blog is gluttonous; it is always hungry; in order to grow your traffic, you must feed it multiple times a day, even on weekends, and after you have fed it, you get to moderate comments, which – between the adoring fans and the snarky haters -- is a roiling occasion of sin just waiting to suck you down into your lowest, most prideful or spitefully deluded self. You spend countless hours reading, studying news stories and documents, collecting fodder you believe will interest your readers, propel a discussion or promote understanding; occasionally, (or, frequently) a political story will pique the interest and – seizing an opportunity to demonstrate the right of the faithful to participate in the civil arena – you will venture a heated opinion that can result in virtual fisticuffs between yourself and any or all of your readers. And the next day, you get to do it all over again!

But when you ask the same blogger why he doesn't just shut the blog down and get back to the paying work—when you ask her if there isn't something better she can be doing with her time—you will hear a staggeringly similar reply. The blogger will blush and the voice will take on a note of hushed and awestruck humility, “well, it's the darndest thing; every time I've thought about pulling the plug, I'll get an email . . .”

The email will say something like, “I left the church 20 years ago and haven't looked back, but I found your blog while googling about [politics, Irish Coffee recipes, Bryn Terfel, baseball stats, The Vagina Monologues] and noticed your other piece about [confession, the Holy Eucharist, Mary, the Rosary, *Humanae Vitae*, Saint Catherine of Siena] and started visiting regularly. I have slowly made my way home and recently I received Our Lord in communion for the first time in two decades: don't stop blogging!”

Emails expressing similar sentiments seem to come, “providentially” to every Catholic blogger I know—nunbloggers, Mommybloggers, doctrine-aficionados, human-interest bloggers—every single time they begin to think about quitting. It is a humbling affirmation that while we do nothing of ourselves, we can be willing to make ourselves a sort of conduit (in my case a very dubious conduit) through which the Holy Spirit, who often uses the most confounding means and methods to work God's will, has a bit more room to maneuver.

And that is almost the whole point of Jesus' command "Ephphatha; be opened" (Mk. 7:34) isn't it? If one were to ask me what nearly seven years of toiling online—writing for several digital "magazines" both secular and religious, editing and organizing and spending entirely too much time promoting the work of myself and others in "fun" social media (by which Satan keeps the whole world willfully, fitfully distracted) and all the time blogging, blogging, blogging, that would finally be my answer. I have learned to stay open, even when one wishes to slam the door closed, because my job online is the same as what all of us are called to everywhere else: to be opened, so the Holy Spirit has one more avenue by which to move around and get the real work done, even using our flub-ups and foibles, to God's own purposes which are often none of our beeswax. As Bono once sang, "it's alright, it's alright; She moves in mysterious ways."

Does that sound like I fancy myself some indispensable cog in the Divine Whirlygig? Well, I am a cog; so are you. A Jesuit once told me "humility is truth" and the truth is I have no idea whether my particular cog is indispensable. I can't imagine that it could be. In 7 years at it I have posted nearly 6,000 times on my blog. That works out to roughly 2.1 blogposts a day, but then, I have only recently begun to take weekends off. Most of those thousands of posts are forgettable dross—recently I informed the world that a Canadian marketing scheme for a feminine hygiene product has satisfied my lifelong desire to hear my name in a pop song. Perhaps 150 of my posts involve essays or ideas I think could add something more than mere racket to the general din. I doubt any of those, though, would ever be considered indispensable to anyone at all, myself included, and I sometimes look at my archives and understand the poet's urge to strike a match on his notebooks and watch it all burn. Or, this being the digital age, installing an overwrite program and watching a portion of one's life become quietly trashed, one zippy blue line at a time.

But then there is God and his unknowable plans and perspectives. I look at the way I was raised, in a feral, confrontational environment; I look at my lifelong compulsion to consume news and news by-products, both churchy and secular, and the means by which I currently digest it all through a processor and, it seems to me I am precisely where I am supposed to be. I imagine God as the indulgent parent of a hyperactive kid who—all unconcerned that the refrigerator door is already overflowing—keeps handing up one glitter-and-macaroni creation after another for posting. If God eventually allows most of the stuff to line cosmic birdcages while a piece here-or-there speaks to a surprising soul in a surprising way, that is none of my concern; if this is where I am supposed to be, I just want to keep using the paste and scissors and crayons, and let someone else make sense of it all.

I suppose others can blog productively without feeling like their mostly-forgettable pearls are somehow necessary to God, but I am convinced that Catholics who are online and interested in not just making noise but assisting in digital evangelism need only maintain an attitude of openness—both in writing and responding—and God will do the rest. Very recently, on a day when I was once again feeling burned-out and wondering if I wanted to continue, I received one of those “providential” emails, this time from a young “Occupy Wall Street” enthusiast. He had read me out of context and sought me for a Twitter confrontation. Amid fast-moving timelines packed with headlines and hash-tagged manias of a moment, we conducted a three-day back-and-forth that ended on a very civil notion that the world was a mysterious place where human answers were failing, but it was important to keep talking. A week later, out of nowhere, his missive announced that he had gone to confession and assisted at Mass, receiving Holy Communion again for the first time in years. I am not sure why or how that came about, except that Christ wanted it, and in that case, all one can do is throw one’s hands to heaven and say, “well, alright, then, Lord, I’ll keep the lines open! I’ll still make mistakes and offend from time-to-time, but I know now that this has nothing to do with me. It’s all yours.”

That makes me sound a lot holier and more humble than I am. Whatever else it is, a blog is an enormous temptation to egoism, and even the humblest blogger (that would not be me) will admit that the insta-gratification of seeing your freshly-minted thoughts commented upon, argued, “liked” or “followed” and linked-to by other sites means dancing, every day, with one’s own prideful devil. It also means finding a balance between coming off like an arrogant scold, more-Catholic-than-the-Pope or a complete hypocrite

This is where bloggers often struggle much more than a Catholic writer who is publishing a book every two years or a column once or twice a week. Editors have a way of reminding a writer that they have built an audience with certain expectations; they are able to tell a writer when he or she is veering into objectionable territory; they can pass a note wondering, “did you mean to be this uncharitable?”

A blogger has no editor and is frequently writing on a breaking story while passions are fully engaged; the “publish” button is too often hit before a breath has been taken, with the result the writer realizes that she has let too loose the intemperate tongue; that he has heaped scorn upon another by the steaming ladles-full while standing in a puddle of his own soup.

If a Catholic blogger wants to maintain credibility, and frankly if he wants to continue to live and grow in the faith, an admission of bad behavior must follow.

And oh, how that can sting! I once had to admit that while Nancy Pelosi had said something maddeningly offensive and stupid, I had actually managed to be even more offensive and stupid in my reaction. Oh, yes. It stings! But it teaches, too. There is nothing quite like shooting oneself in public, while aiming at someone else, to help broaden one's sense of Catholic inclusivity. It is hard to sustain disdain for the careening vapidity of another's reasoning, when your response has revealed you skidding off your own road.

I am forever traipsing along the fine wire between heaven and earth, valor and vulgarity, that I built into my blog from day one, when I gave it a religious persona ("The anchoress" – a nod to my shyness) and declared it a spot for the free discussion of "Religion, Politics and Baseball; the important stuff!" Including religion in one's blog sets one up to be called out and held accountable for content on a different level; while I am ultimately grateful for that, it was not my design.

My blog is unusual in that I did not begin the venture with any particular perspective or sense of mission. Having free-lanced for years, I was enduring a bit of a dry-spell, and had fallen into commenting on news forums to keep my skills honed, and to get a sense of what I thought about all the new questions—and how they related to our old answers—in our post-9/11 world (in saying "a writer writes to find out what she thinks," Flannery O' Connor never spoke a truer word!). The blog was a natural outgrowth of that – the headline forum was fun but its participants had often been confused by Catholic stories or downright hostile to them, particularly after our first "Long Lent" of scandal-revelation in 2002.

The blogging started in 2004. Throwing together a site headed with a Catholic reference (my original page was illustrated with a picture of a nun with her back to the camera) but open to discussing almost anything has meant that I have sometimes flirted with unintentionally giving scandal. Shortly after writing a scathing (and yes, vulgar and uncharitable but also rather funny) takedown of *The Vagina Monologue*, I was "Live-blogging the Lion's Last Breath" by offering respectful and reverent, minute-by-minute, updates on everything pertaining to the last days of Blessed Pope John Paul II, and I sensed no cognitive dissonance in posting two such disparate pieces. To my mind, I was simply being myself in all of my human and conflicted glory and demonstrating, in a sense, a "catholic" interest in the world around me.



**ABOVE**  
**St. Pierre Dove;**  
**Sacred Heart Basilica,**  
**St. Peter's Cathedral**

But posting to a blog that carries even a limited Catholic perspective began to form me in the most unexpected ways. The Holy Spirit, again, moving along that dubious conduit. If some visitors tripping into *The anchoress* looking for a rant about a headline eventually find their way into a pew, the blog has had a not-dissimilar effect on me, as well. Compelled to explain what I believed, and why I believed it to others, I time and again discovered the depths of my unsuspected Orthodoxy. Though politically I have always identified as a “classical liberal” my rants had others calling me a “conservative,” and I didn’t mind that much, until 2005 brought a brouhaha over illegal immigration and I found myself completely at odds with my readership and wholly aligned with the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB). This, my departing readers informed me, meant I was a “Conservative in Name Only,” and as I watched my traffic decline by almost 2,000 unique visits a day, all I could say in rebuttal was, “I’m not a conservative; but I am not a modern liberal, either. I am a Catholic.”

Increasingly, as I blogged about the headlines, and prayer and social issues and politics, I began to realize that mature Catholicism cannot comfortably align itself with any one ideology or political party. Further, it seemed to me that all of these things were, in reality, of a piece—that none could be considered completely separable from the other, no matter how much the zeitgeist trends toward compartmentalization. Catholicism is too large, too wide, too nuanced, too small-catholic to permit ideological purity. Whenever a Catholic seems to manage that purity, he or she has tended to betray a tenet of Catholicism to get there. And that, to my way of thinking, is actually becoming one of the best arguments for Catholicism, and Catholic Orthodoxy, in the world. It brings well-reasoned resistance against sophist trends and the sentimentalist’s means of movement, both in the secular world and the sacred.

I do not seem to be the only Catholic blogger to have come to this conclusion; the balkanization of ideas and positions is bringing the world to a stagnant place. People are beginning to notice, like my “Occupy Wall Street” friend, that carping at each other from behind cyber-barricades is not just unproductive but actively destructive, and very often it is the non-Catholic—or fallen-away Catholic who has been too long in and of the world—who will notice this and go looking for a point of view that seems fresh, meaningful, sensible and able to last beyond a news cycle. Increasingly, Catholics on blogs and in social media are pulling away from everything that is kneejerk and unthinking. They’re making a point of discussing headlines through the prism of long-established Catholic understanding, with its entire inviting nuance, and the worldly disillusioned are picking it up.

There is a paradox ingrained within the internet. It is a vast expanse of information, continually being narrowed down, echo chamber, by echo chamber into agenda driven compartments until the broadness of its potential becomes a managed illusion. People find their internet niche and plant themselves there; soon they become part of a safe collective where every thought is validated by fifty voices and new additions are quickly sized up to see if they can be absorbed or must be rejected.

The cyber-world is teeming with intellectual and spiritual dead ends, and that is what makes a Catholic presence within it so imperative. Those collectives will over time prove themselves a bigger challenge to online Catholic evangelization than the doubters and secularly-inclined ever could be. They are full of “devout” Catholics, who have lost touch with the reassuring broadness and humility found within the Church in her depths; they have become stuck in their echo chamber, and find it increasingly difficult to respond to anything but cues and signals. On one end they

are determined to either consign their less-than-perfect co-religionists (and most bishops) to eternal flames of woe; on the other end they are convinced that if the church (and all bishops) would just stop being so churchy and “bishop-y” the world would flock to her pews. Having thus marginalized themselves—and certain that their ideas answer all of the church’s questions— these folks dig in their heels and never, ever allow themselves to hear the whispered “ephphatha!”

Until last year, my blog had “banned” exactly 5 people from participating in the comment boxes. Believing that dialogue, even when frustrating, is better than over-control, I do not remove anyone lightly. In 2011, though, the ban-hammer came down twelve times before we even made it into Advent, and each time it was not the atheist or the shouting progressive anti-Catholic who was kicked out of the forum; it was the collective-dwelling fanatically impassioned Catholic who—to paraphrase Churchill, could not change his mind and would not change the subject.

After new media-using Catholics have evangelized their coasting-but-curious fellows and the trained-to-distrust who are nevertheless to be sought out and invited in, their biggest challenge will be to coax the collectivists out of their corners and into the wider corral.

I believe our good Pope understands this. In 2010, he spoke several times of “giving the internet a soul.” Celebrating the church’s 44th “World Communications Day” Benedict XVI wrote:

The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul’s exclamation: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel” (1 Cor 9:16) The increased availability of the new technologies demands greater responsibility on the part of those called to proclaim the Word, but it also requires them to become become more focused, efficient and compelling in their efforts.

His message was directed primarily to priests, whom he urged to embrace the internet with blogs, social networking and, where possible, multi-media:

Priests stand at the threshold of a new era: as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word. . .

When our savvy pontiff proposed a specifically priestly presence on the web, it was signaled his awareness that active Catholics, “lapsed” Catholics, those who had only the barest acquaintance with their baptisms, and even the wholly unchurched

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BENEDICT XVI

were visiting blogs, sharing apologetics videos and homilies, reading (sometimes for the first time in their lives) full encyclicals, without media filtration—and they were making arguments and reaching conclusions. Benedict recognized that the new mission front would be broached through a modem, and that the people surfing back and forth through what Father Robert Barron has called “the virtual Areopagus” (“The Virtual Areopagus: Digital Dialogue with the Unchurched,” *The Church and the New Media*, OSV 2011, 25-44)—from FirstThings.com to dotcommonweal, from Crisis Magazine to the National Catholic Reporter, from EWTN to the multi-faith integrators like Patheos.com and Beliefnet—would very soon be in need of shepherds capable of teaching, guiding and leading not from the rectory but through a router. The pope was perfectly right.

Avid viewers of cowboy films are familiar with a cinematic cliché: a new town has formed and the people are capably managing their day-to-days, but they are aware of encroaching elements—outsiders who visit, look around and interact superficially with the townsfolk. Tensions increase as everyone awaits the inevitable power-grab that is ingrained in human nature. One day, as the settlers and the encroachers prepare to stand-off, someone rides into town, and everyone knows that sooner or later, sides will be chosen and a battle will be engaged. When Benedict urged his priests into wide-open and barely-settled Cyberville Pass, this was precisely the image that came to my mind: *here comes the Marshall and his posse, and we're all in for a surprise.*

Seven years into this adventure, I believe Benedict and his priests have moseyed into town at precisely the right moment. And having observed how the Holy Spirit maneuvers when given the room, I am not at all surprised at it.

