



#BoycottOnlineAnger: Elton John and Dolce & Gabbana

Tim Byron SJ

Elton John has been sharply critical of recent comments about family life made by fashion designers Dolce & Gabbana. The musician's campaign to boycott the clothing label has since generated a media storm. The whole affair is an example of a worrying new phenomenon of digital puritanism, says Tim Byron SJ. What would St Ignatius have to say about the vitriol that has been on display this week?

Multimillionaire fashion designers Dolce & Gabbana gave an [interview](#) last week to an Italian magazine in which, amongst other things, they said: 'The only family is the traditional one. No chemical offsprings and rented uterus: life has a natural flow, there are things that should not be changed.' This courageous and counter-cultural stance seems to be born out of personal experience: in an interview in 2006, Stefano Gabbana revealed that, as a gay man, he had approached a woman to be the mother of his baby but said he struggled with the idea.

Elton John, the multimillionaire musician and the father of two children conceived through IVF and born to a surrogate mother, reacted strongly and on wrote on [Instagram](#): 'How dare you refer to my beautiful children as "synthetic". And shame on you for wagging your judgemental little fingers at IVF – a miracle that has allowed legions of loving people, both straight and gay, to fulfil their dream of having children.' And so started a campaign on social media to #BoycottDolceGabbana.

Of course, rather than being the catalyst for a debate which could have touched on important issues such as infertility treatment, egg donation, surrogate motherhood, designer babies, prenatal screening, etc., the celebrity row generated a reaction that was far from reasonable or rational. A succession of



celebrities rushed to parade their outrage as a badge of honour. This liberal intolerance led to Gabbana accusing Elton John of fascism. Some commentators accused Elton John of the real bigotry.

It is a depressing modern phenomenon to witness the online mob in full cry, as many pick up their self-righteous pitchforks and run those who have offended them out of town. The aggression and

anger on social media is ubiquitous and unhealthy. The virtual environment consists of a perfect storm of factors: relative anonymity and unaccountability, and the ease of antagonising distant abstractions rather than living, breathing interlocutors.

Hold in contrast to this St Ignatius's advice to spiritual directors in the famous Paragraph 22 of the *Spiritual Exercises*, which says the following:

To assure better cooperation between the one who is giving the Exercises and the exercitant, and more beneficial results for both, it is necessary to suppose that every good Christian is more ready to put a good interpretation on another's statement than to condemn it as false.

This is often referred to as the 'Presupposition', and it has a wider application than the Exercises: is a foundation stone for all civil communication.

I recently shared a platform with Peter Hitchens at a university debate about belief in God; Peter and I were debating with two atheists. It was a very well-attended debate, with students crammed into a lecture theatre, spilling out into the aisles. Speaking later with the Catholic students who had come, it was clear that a few were disappointed with my performance: 'Father, you didn't get angry enough!' It is interesting that it is a hallmark of 'digital natives', those under-25's who have been born into the digital age, to think that the only way to get your message across online is to shout loudly.

Taking Ignatius's timeless advice to heart – and translating it into the digital age and the Wild West of social media – seems to be an important starting point if we wish to restore civil communication. Another trend which makes me uneasy has been highlighted in Eli Pariser's brilliant book, *The Filter Bubble*. (Don't panic, digital natives – you can also find him online! He has given a [TED talk](#).) His thesis is that,

mainly due to a series of customisations in Google and algorithms in Facebook, our news browsing experience has entered an age of personalisation. Essentially our computers are delivering increasingly tailored news feeds, which effectively reflect our own worldview back to us. This filtering is invisible – hence the 'bubble' – but its effect is like that of listening to talk radio which just repeats our own prejudices back to us. This has an isolating effect and further undermines civil communication. It is particularly desolating on religious websites and blogs, which have the potential to divide rather than unite.

The internet cannot forgive until it learns how to forget our own bigotries, and the new phenomenon of online puritanism suggests we are moving in the wrong direction.

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