

# The church whisperer

WILMINGTON, Del. - Here's how Rocco Palmo announced his appearance at the March 22 Theology on Tap session in Wilmington in his blog, Whispers in the Loggia:

"Two nights later ... it's a short trip down I-95 to Wilmington and another ToT, this time for Bishop Mickey and Co., offering some reflections and" - whoa! Did he say Bishop Mickey?

He did. If Bishop Michael Saltarelli is startled by the chummy reference, it could be worse. Mr. Palmo's nickname for his hometown's archbishop, Cardinal Justin Rigali, is "Pharaoh."

Mr. Palmo's blog also features occasional references to "Fluffiness" and "The Fluff" - that would be Pope Benedict XVI, so-dubbed, Mr. Palmo says, because of his wispy white hair.

Mr. Palmo, 24 and single, has created buzz in certain church circles for Whispers, which he writes from his home in South Philadelphia.

He will speak at Catherine Rooney's Irish Pub & Restaurant next Thursday about his "Holy Adventure" in writing his Whispers blog, his column "Almost Holy - Confessions of a Bad Catholic" for the Paulist Fathers' Web site Busted Halo, and weekly reports for the British Catholic newspaper The Tablet.

Blogs (Web logs) exist in a cyberspace world somewhere between journalism, diaries and screeds. They tend to be informal, opinionated and focused on a single subject - the writer's interests.

Mr. Palmo's Whispers in the Loggia, which he first posted on the Internet in December 2004, is typical of many blogs. Yet, while it's just one of at least 900 Catholic blogs, its main focus is unique: his beat is the hierarchy of the Catholic Church.

"The source of the life of the church is derived from the figure of bishops," Mr.

Palmo told The Dialog, newspaper for the Diocese of Wilmington, last week. "Bishops matter – their personality, how they make people feel."

Bishops "have the governing spirit, the grace of office to lead us," Mr. Palmo said, but they often feel they don't get a fair shake in the press. "The good things they're doing aren't as out there as they should be."

That's where Mr. Palmo's Whispers in the Loggia comes in, he said, at the intersection of the church and the press. "I'm not a flack," he said.

Whispers' hierarchy beat, which includes texts of homilies, rumors of appointments and gossip on Vatican personalities and office politics, draws more than 8,000 unique visitors to the site daily, according to Mr. Palmo.

Readers in recent months have read about the pope's appointment of a new president for the Italian bishops' conference ("the choice is a compromise between two of Benedict's most influential policy movers"), a new bishop in Dallas ("Reportedly, Farrell had indicated his preference to remain in the Northeast") and a notice last November from an Italian weekly that a Turkish publication said the pope "has undergone a small operation in preparation for an eventual bypass operation."

The speculative nature of some of Whispers' reports means the rumors, like that last one, don't always prove to be true.

Mr. Palmo says his sources are "people who keep the church running – bishops, diocesan officials, parish priests and lay leaders." Such sources resulted in the loudest Whisper item to date, when Mr. Palmo last October posted an "exclusive" – an anonymous letter to priests of the Archdiocese of New York that was said to be written by clergy questioning Cardinal Edward Egan's leadership. The cardinal began his response in an issue of Catholic New York, the archdiocesan newspaper, by writing, "On Tuesday, Oct. 10th, a 'blog' in Philadelphia that specializes in Church gossip published a letter attacking my pastoral service to the Archdiocese of New York. The letter was unsigned and alleged to be the product of a 'committee' of clergy. In point of fact, it may have been written by a member of the clergy, a member of the laity or even a group of clergy and/or laity."

That Whispers item and the cardinal's reaction increased the site's readership "by about a third going forward," Mr. Palmo said.

His own press notices have helped, too, including stories from The Associated Press, New York Times, Washington Post and National Public Radio, outlets that have sought Mr. Palmo's comments on church matters or profiled him.

### Ivy League and church politics

Mr. Palmo is a University of Pennsylvania grad with a political science degree who grew up amid South Philadelphia's narrow streets. He did not attend Catholic school but became infatuated with his faith's history and hierarchy as a boy after greeting Philadelphia's Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua at the Cathedral Basilica of Ss. Peter and Paul. His fascination with church prelates led to his writing newly appointed bishops. When Mr. Palmo was 16, he wrote a letter to the new Archbishop of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. He was happy to receive a reply from Archbishop Thomas Collins then, and again, years later when the prelate e-mailed him at Whispers to say he enjoyed the blog. That connection was cemented recently when Mr. Palmo attended Archbishop Collins' installation as archbishop of Toronto.

Mr. Palmo said his professors at Penn also enjoyed how he would work church politics into papers he wrote for class. The profs "ate it up to my shock and surprise," he said.

The idea for his blog "wasn't something I thought about or internalized," Mr. Palmo said.

"I knew I had these contacts; I knew I had the background knowledge some of the best reporters in the country didn't have (about the church). I kind of looked at myself in the mirror and said, 'Why don't you try this?'"

Less than three years later, Mr. Palmo isn't shy about marketing his church connections. He will cultivate friends in the secular press by calling them "as a professional courtesy" when he hears a new bishop is about to be appointed to their area.

After he learned Bishop Kevin Farrell, an auxiliary bishop of Washington, D.C., would probably be named to Dallas, Mr. Palmo called the Dallas Morning News'

religion reporter. When Mr. Palmo ran Bishop Farrell's appointment on Whispers some 16 hours before it was released in Rome, the religion reporter in Dallas published Mr. Palmo's scoop, citing Whispers as the source.

"I enjoy working with the secular press," Mr. Palmo said. "What I do is more of a secular press thing. That's my style. My faith isn't going to have me pulling punches. I'm a member of the church but, at the same time, I don't work for the church. I'm a free agent."

Although a blog's readers are usually young, Mr. Palmo believes visitors to his site have a median age of about 60.

"Part of the core of my readership are, shockingly, retired priests," he said. Whenever he pitches for funds (Whispers is freely available like most blogs, and no one pays Mr. Palmo to write it.) he hears from such priests, he said. "I'm read by people in the church who are invested in it and love it."

Whispers' readers might have noticed that Mr. Palmo's approach has become gentler since its beginning. Earlier stories were more vitriolic.

"At the beginning, I had nothing to lose," he said. "There was less of a responsibility to be as accurate as possible, to be as self-suppressing as possible. I would float names in the first year with less of a guard and just kind of let it fly."

'Less spleen-venting, more encouraging'

He's heard the criticisms. He's seen his name on a do-not-admit list at a church event and has started "a conscious effort to do more reporting and less spleen-venting." He hopes Whispers is now "more encouraging, more hopeful and more responsible."

Mr. Palmo sees a lot of hope for the church these days despite "all the difficult, painful, heart-wrenching moments" of recent years stemming from the clergy sex abuse scandal.

"The fact the church is still able in a great way to captivate the public imagination says to me there's an opening there. The longing for God in this society and in this age is the same as it's ever been. When religion or forces of good don't step up and

say, 'we're here,' it allows counterproductive things to take the stage."

Mr. Palmo also sees signs of hope in the way the church is embracing new communications technology, as evidenced by Boston Cardinal Sean O'Malley's blog, Cardinal Rigali's Lenten homilies on YouTube, Los Angeles Cardinal Roger Mahony's chat room conversations and podcasts produced by the Archdiocese of Atlanta.

"A failure to bring the church to the Internet would be like bishops who failed to build churches for immigrant populations," Mr. Palmo said. "The Internet is the bricks and mortar of our time. If the church doesn't have a presence on the Internet, it doesn't exist. That's where the people are. That's where our people are."