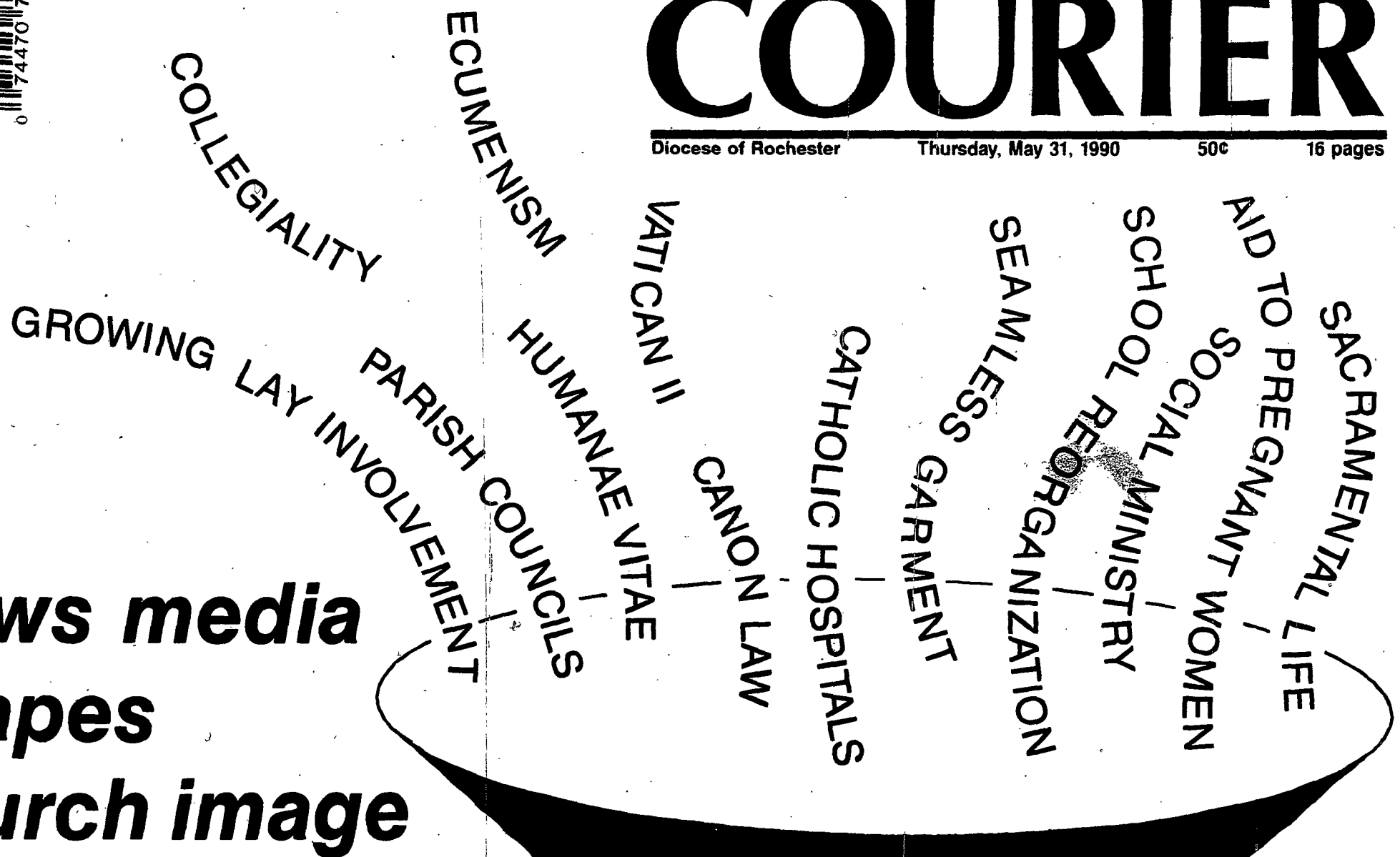




# CATHOLIC COURIER

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## News media shapes church image

By Rob Cullivan  
Staff writer

During the Holy Father's 1987 visit to the United States, a reporter was puzzled when Father Kenneth Doyle told him that an electrical storm had forced the pope to stop saying an outdoor Mass right after his homily.

The reporter asked what a homily was, and Father Doyle — director for media relations for the U.S. Catholic Conference — told him that it was sort of like a short sermon.

"Did that come before they sacrificed the virgin?" came the reporter's next question.

While Father Doyle's anecdote is an extreme example of journalistic naivete, it highlights the gap that sometimes exists between the perception of Catholicism by the secular news media and the reality embodied in the U.S. church.

Yet that gap has narrowed somewhat during the past few years, though possibly not to the complete satisfaction of the church's press-relations experts. More and more newspapers are increasing their coverage of Catholicism and of other religions, and many major newspapers have even hired one or two full-time religion reporters.

"My feeling is that anyone who goes into religious reporting today is going into a much fresher field, a much more exciting field than prevailed 20 years ago," commented John Dash, copy editor and freelance religion columnist for the Rochester Democrat and Chronicle.

Dash's sentiments were echoed by David Crumm, religion writer for the Detroit Free Press.

"In the last five to 10 years, you've seen a real upsurge in interest in serious religious writing," Crumm observed in a telephone interview with the Catholic Courier.

The journalist credited the presidencies of Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan — who both publicly stated their religious beliefs — for bringing religion onto the public stage. He also noted that the Islamic fundamentalist movement in Iran and Christian fundamentalism in this country have compelled editors to take a second look at the role faith plays in shaping lives and events.

If any one Catholic can lay claim to being a personal "media event," it is Pope John Paul II. At the beginning of his papacy, the Holy Father opened the doors of the Vatican to the press in a way none of his predecessors had done.

Wilton Wynn, a staff writer for Time magazine noted that the pope welcomes blunt and sometimes controversial questions from reporters heretofore relegated to seeking answers from anonymous "official

Vatican sources."

"We journalists were proud to have at last an impeccable, quotable source on a Vatican story — the pope himself," Wynn wrote in his 1988 book *Keepers of the Keys*. Wynn further observed that the pope's initial friendliness to the press has allowed journalists to probe deeper into once mysterious church positions. "We (journalists quizzed) the pontiff on complicated questions like liberation theology — and ... (we got) direct answers."

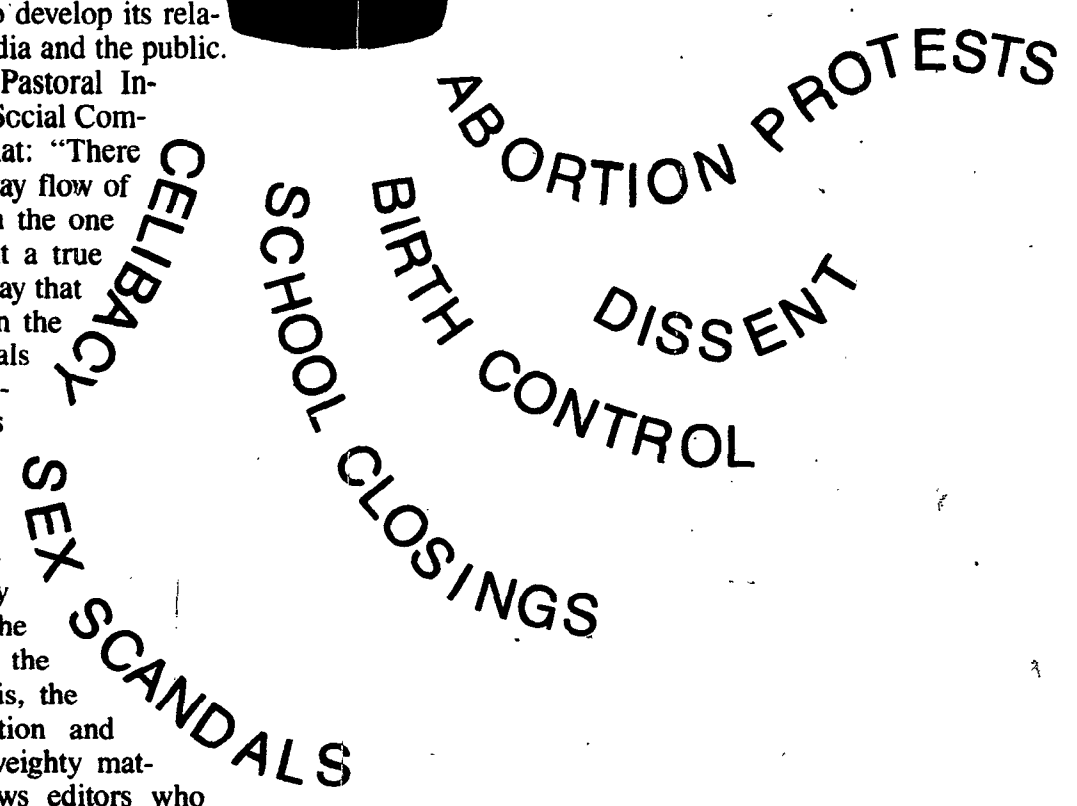
The pope's openness to the press mirrors a trend that began to spread throughout the Catholic Church in the United States following the issuance of two Vatican II documents on social communication, which called the church to develop its relationship with the news media and the public.

Section #175 of the "Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication" observed that: "There must be a continual two-way flow of news and information. On the one hand, this aims to present a true image of the Church in a way that makes it visible to all. On the other, this exchange reveals to the ecclesiastical authorities the surges, currents and ideas that stir the world of men."

The questions the church asked of itself following Vatican II inevitably caught the attention of the press, most notably in the 1980s. The vocations crisis, the debates concerning abortion and birth control, and other weighty matters began to interest news editors who previously had seen their "religion pages" as places to put parish announcements and church news briefs.

"Religion is now on the press agenda, and ... can, in fact, compete with other news and feature coverage for placement anywhere in the paper, including page 1A," stated a report on religious news and readership written last year by Religious News Service, a non-denominational news organization based in New York

Lorraine H. Hennessey/Graphics Manager



City. Still, public-relations workers for the church believe that some of the stories that appear on a newspaper's front page or lead a TV news broadcast distort or overemphasize certain aspects of the church.

"I tend to think there's a focus on a narrow range  
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