

# Study: Church coverage negative

By Sister Mary Ann Walsh  
Catholic News Service

WASHINGTON — U.S. secular news media portray the church as "conservative, oppressive, and out of touch with the modern world," according to a study of television and print coverage of the church over the last three decades.

The study, entitled "Media Coverage of the Catholic Church," was released in Washington March 26. It was commissioned by the Knights of Columbus and the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights.

The study was conducted by S. Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson and Linda Lichter of the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs, a non-partisan, non-profit organization. The center analyzes scientifically how the media treat social and political issues.

The study found news media have emphasized criticism more than support of church teaching when reporting on Catholic issues.

Findings were based on a sampling of the "CBS Evening News," *Time* magazine, *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. Analysts studied coverage in three five-year blocks, 1964-68, 1974-78 and 1984-88.

"On most controversies," including birth control, priestly celibacy, role of women and minorities, and dissent, "the church came out on the losing side of the issue debate," the study said.

The exception was ecumenism, which the news media treated as an issue "supported by all people of good will," it said.

In the overall reporting, "sources sup-

porting the church were in the minority on the broad range of debates involving sexual morality and church authority that dominated the coverage," the study said.

Coverage grew increasingly negative over the decades as "official church teachings were promoted less frequently and were challenged more often when they did appear," the study said.

The study found the church depicted as "a beleaguered authority struggling to enforce its traditions and decrees on a reluctant constituency."

The 93-page study said reporters often covered religion as if it were politics and treated controversies "as conflicts between the church hierarchy, on one side, and lower-level clergy, lay Catholics and non-Catholics on the other."

Sex was the leading controversial topic in every time period studied and in coverage by every outlet except *The Washington Post*, where sex came in second to power struggles.

*Time* magazine was the "most preoccupied" with sex, it said.

*Time* and *The Washington Post* gave significantly heavier emphasis to people opposed to church teachings on sexuality than did *The New York Times* and CBS. The effect overall was "to present the debate over sexual morality as a split between the church hierarchy and everyone else," the study said.

The study found a shift in treatment of abortion.

In the 1970s, when coverage centered on the U.S. Catholic bishops' response to the 1973 *Roe vs. Wade* Supreme Court decision legalizing abortion, most "published statements supported the church," the

study said. By the 1980s, "the amount of debate had nearly doubled; opinion was now slightly opposed to the church," it said.

It attributed the change to secular groups campaigning for abortion rights and coverage of the controversy surrounding a 1984 *New York Times* advertisement seeking a change in church abortion policy.

News media gave "heavy coverage" to power and authority issues too, and "opinions in news stories consistently favored decentralizing power," the study said.

Such coverage increased in the 1980s, "largely due to discussions of academic freedom and dissent connected to such high-profile figures as Father Charles Curran and Archbishop Raymond Hunthausen" of Seattle, and "the push for greater theological orthodoxy" by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, head of the Vatican Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, it said.

On church-state relations, news media showed the church in a positive light when it presented the church's anti-war positions, the study said. However "few sources supported church involvement in political affairs" when the issues were domestic matters, such as public funding for private schools, abortion legislation and other "perceived threats to separation of church and state," it said.

In social controversies, CBS stories "were consistently more favorable to the church's teachings" than the others and were least likely to "use judgmental language, which tended to depict the church in a negative light."



AP/Wide World Photos  
**BLOODED UNIFORM** — Police Captain Eugene Opperman holds the bloodied uniform of an unidentified white policeman, who was bludgeoned to death on March 24 by a mob in the black township of Davayton, east of Johannesburg. Eleven blacks, allegedly part of the mob, were killed by police.

## Parties agree to discuss power sharing in Ireland

LONDON (CNS) — Representatives of Catholic and Protestant political parties in Northern Ireland agreed March 25 to begin talks on future power-sharing in the British-run province.

The agreement to begin talks marked the end of a 15-year impasse on Northern Ireland and was orchestrated by Great Britain's Northern Ireland minister, Peter Brooke.

Brooke secured agreements from the Irish government, the predominantly Catholic Social Democratic and Labor Party and the two main Protestant parties on a dialogue plan, which could result in a locally elected government in Northern Ireland taking over administration of the province from the British government.

The plan, as outlined by Brooke to the British Parliament, also makes reference to the "legitimate interest" of the Irish government in the province.

But Brooke reaffirmed the British position that "Northern Ireland's present status as a part of the United Kingdom will not change without the consent of the majority of its people."

Sinn Fein, the political wing of the outlawed Irish Republican Army, was the only major political party in Northern Ireland to withhold approval from the plan. Sinn Fein was not expected to participate in the talks.

Sinn Fein President Gerry Adams said March 28 that Brooke's proposal "is not the basis for a lasting and democratic peace formula."

"How could it be when at least 35 percent of nationalist opinion in the North is not represented and when the agenda is an exclusively British one?" he said.

British rule of Northern Ireland has fueled charges by the Catholic minority of discrimination by the Protestant majority.

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AP/Wide World Photos  
**WALKING TO VOTE** — Residents of the Chun Nam province in South Korea go to a poll station March 26 to vote in their first local elections in 30 years.