

The worst advice I ever received as a Catholic newspaper editor was the first advice I was given.

"You must be careful," I was told 16 years ago after being named editor of the *Times Review*, newspaper of the Diocese of La Crosse, Wisc., "not to upset the faith of simple people."

I was 24-years-old, had 12 years of Catholic schooling behind me, a master's degree in journalism from Marquette University in Milwaukee, and several years experience working in secular newspapers.

It was not enough to prepare me for a vocation in the Catholic press.

Specifically, I was not prepared to publish news, features, interviews, pictures and opinions on matters that would upset anyone's faith, much less the faith of simple people.

However, it was the implied importance in the warning — do not upset people's faith — that drew me deeper into the Catholic press.

While my journalism school friends were writing about last night's ball game, tax rates and other matters of the moment, I was privileged — as a Catholic newspaper editor — to attend to the eternal concerns of readers.

I have taken comfort over the years that even on my worst days, at least I was on the side of the good guys.

And the reason I can say the first advice I received was the worst advice is because I have never met anyone with a "simple faith."

In the last 16 years I have served in three dioceses as a Catholic newspaper editor — of the *Times-Review*, the *Catholic Bulletin* of the Archdiocese of St.

Paul and Minneapolis, and now of the *Catholic Review* of Baltimore, Md. And by my count, over those years I have visited more than 500 parishes talking to pastors, parish councils and others.

What I have found is many dedicated Catholic Christians trying to live their faith in trying times, trying to find the truth and to follow it.

I have learned that the vocation of the Catholic press is a ministry of service. This service includes education, evangelization and encouragement.

It's amazing, for example, how much Catholics know about their faith, especially because so much has changed or at least altered in the last 25 years.

Where did they learn about their faith? From homilies, from adult-education programs and from diocesan newspapers. No reader of a Catholic newspaper can leave it without knowing and learning more about his or her faith.

For example, a few years after the National Conference of Catholic Bishops published their 1983 pastoral letter, *The Challenge of Peace: God's Promise and Our Response*, members of the parish that includes Annapolis, Md., site of the U.S. Naval Academy, were upset. They didn't like what they were hearing through the secular press about the bishops' statements concerning war and peace.

After the parishioners had the opportunity to read about the issue in a fuller context through the Catholic newspaper, however, they came to grasp what the bishops were saying and to deal with it in their lives.

That to me is what religious education is supposed to do.

The vocation to the Catholic press also means being an evangelist. In the Catholic press, evangelization includes bringing people already engaged in their faith deeper into the mysteries of Christianity. But it also includes bringing back those who have fallen away and bringing in those who are curious about the Catholic life.

Last spring in the Archdiocese of Baltimore, for example, a middle-aged man who had been a fallen-away Catholic was ordained a priest. He credited the Catholic newspaper with encouraging his vocation.

It seems that at the time he was not actively involved with the church, he had been working at a company that received the newspaper. Because he was the only Catholic in the company, the newspaper was put on his desk every week. He began reading it, learned about the permanent diaconate program in



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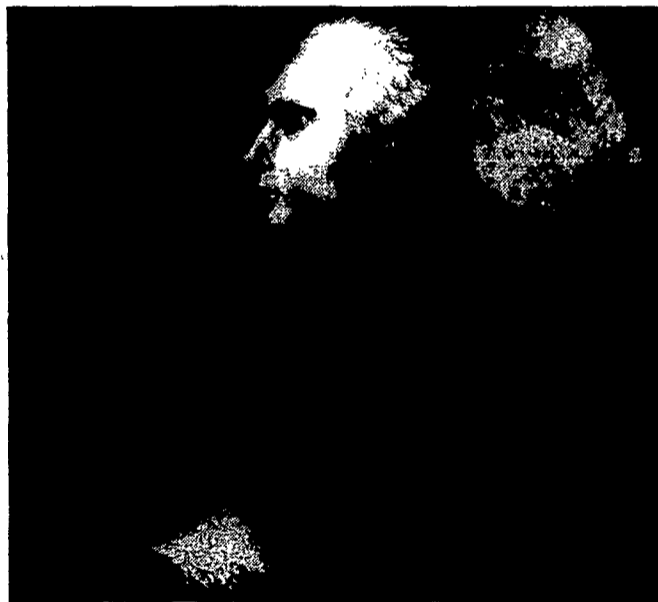
Archdiocese of Baltimore

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Ministry of service underlies vocation in the Catholic press

By Daniel Medinger
Guest contributor



South Carolina Historical Society
Bishop John England, the first bishop of Charleston, S.C., published *The United States Catholic Miscellany*, the first Catholic newspaper in the U.S., in 1822.

United States
CATHOLIC MISCELLANY.

Approved under an act respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof—Art. I, Amend. Con. United States.

[1] CHARLESTON, WEDNESDAY, JUNE 28, 1822. [No. 4]

Sisters of Charity of Our Lady of Mercy, Charleston, S.C. the archdiocese, and ultimately applied for the program. While studying for the diaconate, he discovered his vocation to the priesthood.

Indeed, the Catholic newspaper may well be the only contact many Catholics have each week with their church. In the archdiocese where I now serve, this fact keeps me alert: more people read the diocesan newspaper than attend Sunday Mass. A Catholic newspaper is the biggest pulpit in any diocese.

Finally, a vocation to the Catholic press includes encouragement.

I've learned that many readers expect affirmation

from their newspapers. I get phone calls like this: "We had a spaghetti supper at our church and 1,000 people came. Why wasn't the newspaper there?" The hurt in the voice says how important it is that parish events get reported and the many acts of Christian service — great and small — be affirmed.

In our archdiocese, for example, one of the Catholic high schools has a sports banquet each year. Organizers invite prominent sports personalities to speak at the event. The school uses banquet proceeds for scholarships.

We had covered the banquet every year, but one year we decided not to cover the event. They called and asked, "What did we do to be cut off from the church? What did we do to offend the archbishop?"

Our presence was an affirmation of what they were doing. We have covered the banquet every year since.

Consistent affirmation is not an easy service to provide. Diocesan newspapers labor under constraints of few resources and many demands. What we call the "diocesan Catholic community" is at best a loose confederation of parishes spread over hundreds or even thousands of square miles. Thus we cannot cover every spaghetti dinner or every banquet, much as we would like to.

While limited resources is not unique in the church, the Catholic press is challenged because it is a very public ministry. Readers know what you do and many know what you did not do.

For dioceses, newspapers are major investments and we in the Catholic

press must steward our resources carefully. My annual budget when I first became a diocesan newspaper editor was about \$495,000; the bishop's budget for the rest of the diocese, excluding Catholic Charities, was about \$525,000.

Finances and limited resources have threatened the continued existence of some diocesan newspapers. Catholic newspapers must prove their worth. And the way to do that is to provide a quality newspaper.

In recent years some dioceses have closed their newspapers. Some have reduced frequency of publication, cut staff, eliminated pages and color.

This is a mistake. Every diocese needs a weekly link with the Catholic community. Every ministry suffers when a newspaper closes or is diminished. Schools don't get promoted, diocesan collections fall short and for seven of 10 households where the diocesan newspaper is the only religious reading material in the house — except for the Bible — the lights go out on faith development.

History is a good bench mark for progress. Bishop John England — Bishop of Charleston, S.C. from 1820-42 — is credited with founding the Catholic press in the United States. In the early 1800s, Bishop England started a newspaper for three reasons. First, he wanted to unite a diocese that included Georgia, as well as North and South Carolina. Second, he wanted to help educate Catholic immigrants. Third, he wanted a means of combatting rampant anti-Catholicism.

Today, our challenges are more diverse and menacing. Gospel values have eroded and the attacks on people of faith are more subtle than in the early 1800s. Catholic newspapers can be a public voice for the church and maintain a loyal readership. It's my experience that reader loyalty is based on the quality of the newspaper rather than religious faith.

Now when colleagues seek my advice about Catholic newspapers, I tell them to take their vocation seriously, to spend their resources wisely and to keep a sense of humor because few people get the opportunity to serve their church and their profession at the same time.

And the most any Catholic newspaper editor can expect to receive is the chance to go to press again.

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