

Censorship in the Catholic press

By Father Richard P. McBrien
Syndicated columnist

The Catholic Press Association holds its annual national convention next week in Milwaukee, Wis.

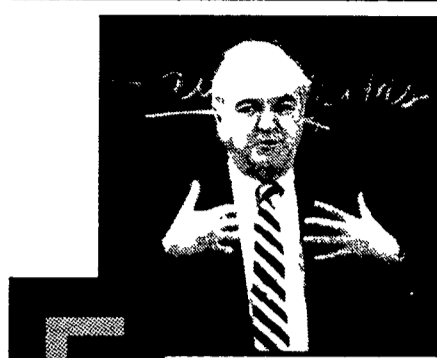
One of the main items on the agenda will be a "white paper" prepared by the Ad Hoc Committee on Freedom and Responsibility. The paper continues a discussion that began two years ago at the CPA convention in Nashville, Tenn.

The document begins with an exceedingly apt quotation from Father George Hunt, SJ, the editor of *America* magazine.

"It is important to recall that, in addition to recording the many heartwarming stories of cures and charity," Father Hunt writes, "the Gospels also never blink in pointing up the cowardice of Peter, the adolescent ambitions of John and James, the skepticism of Thomas, and especially the corrupt or wrong-headed machinations of those in authority like Pilate and the Sanhedrin — i.e., those who wield power in secular and religious governments."

The Catholic press can do no less. If a paper reports only what is "heartwarming" and non-controversial, if it gives space only to the safest and most conservative points of view, and if it engages in propaganda rather than in the dissemination of full and accurate information, it is merely a house organ, not a newspaper.

Real newspapers dig for news as well as report it, never settling for wire-service material, press releases, and other official handouts.



ESSAYS IN THEOLOGY

Real newspapers also interpret the news and encourage discussion and debate about it, through editorials, columns, letters, and cartoons.

When they fail to do this, they become unbelievable and untrustworthy to all but a small group of readers. And if the papers are unbelievable and untrustworthy, they are eventually unpurchased and unread as well.

The Catholic press faces several obstacles as it strives to achieve and maintain standards of professional excellence.

I mention only three: censorship, inadequate funding and staffing, and clericalism.

Censorship involves some form of interference by non-editorial people to forbid or suppress the publication of certain news items and/or the dissemination of certain opinions. The usual penalties for non-

compliance are economic retribution or loss of job.

Last year the Catholic Press Association surveyed its full membership on this touchiest of topics. Nearly 40 percent of the respondents acknowledged that they had personally experienced censorship in their work, and nearly 74 percent said that they had "learned of instances of censorship in other Catholic publications."

According to Barbara Beckwith, CPA president and managing editor of *St. Anthony Messenger*, "There is no question that censorship is a major problem in the Catholic press."

In addition to censorship from without, however, there is also censorship from within.

In some respects, the latter is worse than the former, because self-censorship tends to be even more severe than censorship from without. The self-censor, following the *pars tutior* (the safer course), often stops short of the limits set by the publisher lest those limits be exceeded inadvertently.

Many stories and articles never make it into a diocesan newspaper simply because the editor doesn't want to risk offending the bishop-publisher or a strident minority of readers, who, in turn, will put pressure on the bishop.

A second obstacle to excellence is inadequate funding and staffing.

In some cases, it is a matter of skewed pastoral priorities. Money is available, but just about everything else is deemed more important than the paper.

In other cases, simply not enough

money is available, the bishop's sound pastoral vision, good will, and open-mindedness notwithstanding.

As a result, too many Catholic papers have only one or two reporters at most to cover local news and events. Many others rely almost entirely on the Catholic News Service for stories, feature articles and columns.

Low-budget operations are incapable of improving the presentation of their papers with the use of graphics, color and other modern techniques. Some can't even afford to send their editors to the annual national convention — a minimum requirement for professional growth, not to mention self-respect.

The Catholic press is hampered, thirdly, by clericalism. I am referring here not simply to instances of interference by a bishop-publisher or to the authoritarian style of a given priest-editor, but to those constant and heavy doses of photographs of bishops and other clerics in various poses — usually receiving checks or conferring awards.

An ecclesiology is expressed even there, and it is not the ecclesiology of Vatican II.

How far are we from overcoming these obstacles? One can only speculate, and CPA members are surely in the best position to do that.

In the meantime, editors need not wait upon the bishops for solutions to every problem. They can take one giant step forward even now by putting an end to self-censorship and to the deceptiveness it breeds.

Vows shouldn't be left at the office door

By Gregory F. Augustine Pierce
Syndicated columnist

"I challenge anyone who thinks that the Sixth Commandment is an outdated and obsolete remnant of a bygone era to visit our crowded divorce courts and ask the petitioners how many are there because of the infidelity of their spouse," said Father Thomas Paprocki.

The new chancellor of the Archdiocese of Chicago — who is also a civil lawyer — added, "If adultery is an accepted part of life in 20th-century America, why are so many husbands and wives still unwilling to share their spouses with others? Are they old-fashioned curmudgeons and biddies clinging to archaic social mores?"

"I don't think so," he concluded. "On the contrary, I believe that infidelity in marriage is just as hurtful, outrageous, offensive and unacceptable in our day and age as it was when Moses first carried those tablets down from Mt. Sinai 3,250 years ago."

How is the Sixth Commandment, "You shall not commit adultery," dealt with in today's workplace?

For one thing, many people make a living off the infidelities of married people: counselors, judges, real estate agents, accountants, private detectives, motel operators and — of course — attorneys.

The new television show *Civil Wars* focuses on the fascinating moral issues faced by lawyers representing clients who are divorcing. Is their job merely to fight for their clients, or should they have some concern for the other spouses, for the children, for the institution of marriage itself?

Some of the attorneys depicted on the program, for example, go out of their way to ameliorate the destructive effects of adultery on the couples they deal with, while other attorneys merely use the intense feelings caused by adultery to their clients' advantage.

Yet another major aspect of adultery in the workplace is the phenomenon of sex between co-workers.

Something about the proximity and stimulation of working together on a regular basis leads many people to forget their marriage vows when they walk through the office door.

The workplace can offer special temptations to abuse one's position for sex. Bosses, for example, can use their power to pressure subordinates into giving sexual favors that are not entirely freely offered and may carry huge penalties if withdrawn. Likewise, therapists can abuse the intimate nature of their work by engaging in sex with patients.

And let us not forget the hard work of actually making a marriage "work." This, too, is a requirement of the Sixth Commandment. In an age when divorce is the easy and accepted solution to marital problems, Christians are called to make every effort to work on their marriage. (Notice how the word "work" is used in this connection. We've always realized that marriage was "work," but lately many people have failed to "work" at it.)



FAITH AND WORK

Shouldn't we Christians be known in the workplace as people who are faithful to our spouses and encourage others to do the same? Rather than participating in workplace affairs or even sexual jokes and innuendo, shouldn't we treat sex as the very sacred thing it is?

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