

'Problems' in the Catholic press?

By Karen M. Franz
Editor in chief

I was surprised early last week to learn that I had been quoted in an article appearing in the Sept. 17 edition of *Editor & Publisher*, the newspaper industry's leading trade publication.

The article was written by Renee K. Gadoua and Jim Murphy, who both formerly worked for *The Catholic Sun*, newspaper of the Diocese of Syracuse. My surprise stemmed from the fact that the quote had been taken from a telephone interview I gave Renee about eight months ago for an article she wrote as a freelancer for the *Sun*. Renee never informed me that her notes from that interview would be reused for an article in another publication.

I certainly realize that people interviewed for news stories often dislike the ways in which their statements are used in articles — even when they cannot dispute the accuracy of the actual quotations. Sources often lament that their comments have been taken out of context, or that they were woven into stories in ways that subtly distorted the sources' views.

So I don't expect too much sympathy when I complain about my experience with this *Editor & Publisher* article. But I am angry about three aspects of this story, which levels blanket criticism at all 163 U.S. bishop-publishers who operate diocesan newspapers, and at the staffs of those newspapers as well. The article also fails to note that at least a handful of diocesan newspapers — including the *Catholic Courier* — enjoy positive relationships with their bishop-publishers and the editorial freedom that derives from such relationships.



BETWEEN THE LINES

My first grievance is the origin of the quote attributed to me; nowhere in the article does it acknowledge that the statement was given to the *Sun*. Although I stand behind the comment, I probably would have phrased it differently had I known it ultimately would be read not only by the Catholics of the Syracuse diocese, but also by journalists of every religious stripe all over the country.

Also on journalistic grounds, I object that the article does not acknowledge its authors' ties to the Catholic press. Renee left the *Sun* a few years ago to work for the daily Syracuse

Newspapers, but continued as a freelance writer for the diocesan paper into 1994. Jim's tenure as editor in chief/general manager of *The Catholic Sun* ended only this month.

My final complaint centers on the negative tone of the article — entitled "Problems Within the Catholic Press: Survey shows 'white paper' on freedom and responsibility has fallen on deaf ears within the church hierarchy" — and the selection of an out-of-context quote from me to support that downbeat thesis.

In the interview some eight months ago, Renee asked me what my experience of censorship had been at the *Catholic Courier*, and whether I felt the "white paper" — issued by the Catholic Press Association in December, 1993 — had served to improve relationships between bishop-publishers and their editors across the country.

I stated clearly that Bishop Matthew H. Clark had never exercised any form of censorship over the *Catholic Courier*, although it would be within his legal rights as publisher to do so. I also said I did not believe any CPA "white paper" could change the attitudes either of censorship-minded bishops or conflict-minded editors. Only mutual respect and mutual education about each others' principles can foster healthy publisher-editor relationships.

I observed to Renee that some Catholic-press editors seem almost paranoid about publisher interference. While many publishers — like Bishop Clark — refrain from interfering in the editorial process, it's a fact that many

publishers of both secular and Catholic papers do so daily. And they have every legal right to intervene. Editors who can't live with the rules imposed by their publishers — whether in the Catholic or secular press — should find other jobs.

What follows is the one quote from me included in the *E & P* article:

"I don't have freedom of the press," she said. "I'm an editor. That (freedom) is the right of the publisher. To rail against the publisher is pointless. As long as you're on the payroll, the publisher is the boss."

Given the article's negative tone, I'm sure many *E & P* readers will interpret my words as the lament of an editor who has abandoned journalistic ethics and resigned herself to serving as an apologist for the church. Such an interpretation would miss completely the point I was trying to make.

My point was that many Catholic-press editors seem neither to understand that freedom of the press is a right of the publisher — regardless of whether that publisher wears a pectoral cross — nor to realize that publisher intervention is as common at secular papers as it is in the Catholic press. Instead of working with their bishops to foster editorial integrity, such editors often adopt a defensive approach — one that's implicit in the tone of this *Editor & Publisher* article.

Ultimately, if journalists enter the Catholic press with adversarial attitudes toward their bishop-publishers, it shouldn't surprise anyone when "problems" arise.

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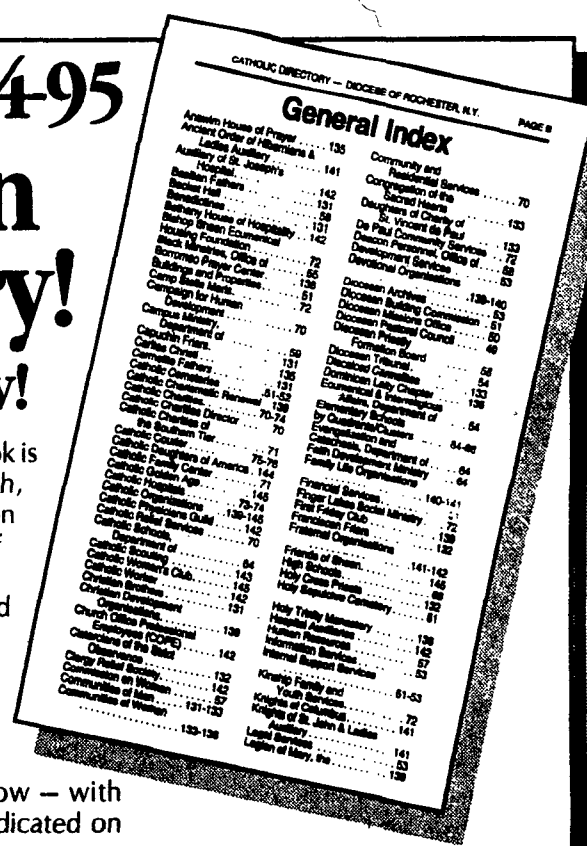
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