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The Power of the Word: Catholic Media and Faith Formation

Greg Erlandson

Catholic media provide "the most widespread means of ongoing adult faith education and formation we have today," said Greg Erlandson, director and editor-in-chief of Catholic News Service. Erlandson delivered the annual Cardinal John Foley Lecture Jan. 30 at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in suburban Philadelphia. The cardinal was editor of The Catholic Standard and Times newspaper in Philadelphia from 1970 to 1984 when he was named to lead what was then the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, which he led until 2007. Erlandson said that as the church

faces a "tsunami of challenges, the role of our Catholic media — the ministry of Catholic media — becomes invaluable." Erlandson spoke about three "privileged tasks" that Cardinal Foley had identified as crucial for the Catholic media ministry: to inform, form and inspire. He said that at a time when the secular media's coverage of the church is "uneven at best," the church "needs a voice to inform Catholics, helping them to see reality through Catholic eyes." Erlandson noted that the "need for formation" provided by Catholic media "is greater now than ever before because Catholic readers are less formed than ever before." In the media world, "the inspirational story is the human interest story," Erlandson said, and for the Catholic media, "the power of such stories, and the need for such stories, is to show that what God asks of us, what the church teaches, can be lived out in the real world." Erlandson's lecture follows.

It is an honor to be here tonight at the Cardinal John Foley Lecture on social communications. I find it quite remarkable that I am speaking at something named in his honor. Cardinal Foley was a giant in the Catholic press when I was just a rookie reporter and editor.

I remember being at the 1984 Catholic Media Conference in Chicago — my first one — which I attended with Fran Maier. It was there that then-Msgr. Foley, who was on the verge of being elected to the Catholic Press Association presidency, had to withdraw because he had just been appointed president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications by Pope John Paul II.

In Chicago he witnessed his good friend Msgr. Owen Campion assume the presidency instead. I can only guess if Cardinal Foley would have preferred the CPA presidency to his position in Rome — far from his beloved Philadelphia. Perhaps he knew firsthand what the Dominican Father Antonin Sertillanges once wrote, "It is not enough that you suffer with the church or for the church; no, faith requires that you must suffer from the church."

But Cardinal Foley was a good and faithful servant, and he did his duty faithfully and well, often with a twinkle in his eye and a bad pun or two or three.

The longtime editor of the Philadelphia diocesan newspaper, the

Catholic Standard and Times, he was forever a favorite son of the Catholic press, and he was a great supporter of the Catholic press and those who worked in it. He attended virtually every Catholic Media Conference put on by the CPA during his Roman exile. The last one, several months before he died, was the centenary celebration of the CPA in Pittsburgh in 2011. Too weak at that point to ascend the stage to speak, he sat at his table in the banquet hall and delivered what was in many ways his last testament.

True to form, he regaled listeners with several funny stories from his career, but then he grew serious. He concluded his remarks with these words:

"God has been very good to me in communications. I'm very proud to come from Philadelphia. I'm very proud to have started my communications life in Philadelphia. But while my work has been almost exclusively religious, I think you should also consider your work not necessarily religious but as sacred.

"You all have a special bond with the people to whom you communicate. You owe them respect. You should treat them with dignity. You should challenge them to goodness. You have a great opportunity to influence the lives of others. They look up to you. They look to you for information, for formation, for inspiration. Please never fail to give them these types of encouragement ... this sacred bond which should exist between you and your listeners and your viewers.

"May you continue to bring people to truth and to love in a society which needs both."

This final sentence is, if anything, more true today than even just six years ago.

I'd like to talk tonight about what he calls "these types of encouragement," these privileged tasks of all who are in Catholic media: information, formation, inspiration.

But first I want to describe three crises that are facing the church in this country. For what I want to say about the Catholic press and its role needs to be understood within the context of these crises.

None of these crises will surprise the folks in this room, I daresay. But my conversations with Catholics around the country suggest that they are unaware, except in the most superficial sense, of

the challenges we face now and will face *in extremis* in the near future.

—The first is the coming demographic cliff regarding the active priesthood. Priestly vocations have slowly increased in recent years, but they are nowhere near the replacement levels needed to address the rate of retirement and death of today's baby-boomer priests. Each year an average of about 400 new priests is ordained nationwide, while an average of 1,500 retire or die. It was once estimated that 50 percent of priests then active in ministry would retire or die between 2009 and 2019.

While this clergy gap may not be a permanent condition nor does it accurately describe the replacement rate in every diocese, it is the challenge facing the vast majority of them. The strategy in some dioceses of delaying the age for priests to retire helped in the short term but this is now coming to its natural end. The impact of the shrinking numbers of clergy on our parishes, our sacramental life and our people will be unavoidable in the next decade.

—This decline is coinciding with another shift: The rise in divorces, remarriages outside the church and cohabitation, and the more recent but striking decline in sacramental practice.

Catholic rates of divorce since the 1960s have grown significantly as they have for society as a whole. Yet only about 15 percent of separated couples pursue annulments so that they might remarry inside the church. The result is that because of their divorce or the irregular status of their remarriage, couples are drifting away from active practice. This has a clear impact on the family: More recently we are seeing a decline in sacramental marriages and a concomitant decline in the rates of baptism and other sacraments.

Religious educators and curriculum publishers are seeing the decline reflected in the size of religious education classes. The Catholic family, the bedrock of the parish and the church's primary unit, has been under extraordinary stress, and the declining rates of sacramental marriage and Catholic practice — while impacted in part by class and region — are worrisome.

—The third shift has been equally long in the making, and that is the challenge that parishes face in passing on the faith to the next generation. Since

the 1950s there has been a seismic shift from a religious education rooted in an extensive Catholic school system to a predominantly parish-based system, once called CCD, staffed by volunteers and conducted after school hours or on weekends.

Only 15 percent of Catholic primary school-aged children attend Catholic schools. Statistics suggest that this decline may impact religious vocations, since Catholic schools are still where most religious vocations come from.

This is not the only cause for concern. There are hundreds of dedicated directors of religious education and catechists making great sacrifices to pass on the faith every day in this country. The difficult truth, however, is that the religious education system has not yet discovered how most effectively to educate and evangelize Catholic young people in the wake of the decline of the Catholic school system and the weakening of the Catholic family. Reasons for this have ranged from the quality of the pedagogy to the knowledge, or lack thereof, of the volunteers, but nearly everyone agrees that many Catholic parents are too distracted, undereducated in the faith or broken to assume their role as "primary educators" of their children.

To make matters more challenging, the same demographic change that is impacting the priesthood is impacting religious education. Many of the women religious and ex-women religious who have led religious education programs in so many dioceses are themselves reaching retirement age. Catholic universities, with a few notable exceptions, have abandoned catechetics as a discipline, and finding well-educated, well-qualified people to assume positions of leadership is increasingly a challenge in many places.

Two generations of parents have been educated primarily in, at best, 40-minute class sessions 20 or so weeks a year from first through eighth grades or until confirmation, whichever comes first. Too many of them are, in terms of their religious IQ, children inhabiting adult bodies. And while much has been made that Catholics today are the "best educated" in the history of the church in this country, this applies to their MDs and their MBAs, not to their religious education.

For parishes and dioceses facing this trio of crises, forming adult Catholics in the faith is a critical need if we want to shore up parishes stressed by a clergy gap, if we want to shore up Catholic families that are the building blocks of those parishes and if we want to shore up a parish- and family-centered religious education system. Yet most parishes have neither the resources nor the strategies to educate and evangelize today's adults, who are themselves the products of this inadequate system.

At this point in U.S. church history, the greatest strategic need facing the church may be in the area of adult faith formation and education.

I would argue that within this context, a vibrant Catholic media — print, digital, radio, television — is needed more than ever. Why? Because it is still the most widespread means of ongoing adult faith education and formation we have today. As the church and its parishes face this tsunami of challenges, the role of our Catholic media — the ministry of Catholic media — becomes invaluable.

And it is in this context that we examine the tasks of Catholic media as described by Cardinal Foley: to inform. To form. To inspire.

Informing

First, to inform.

In 1992 the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, led by then-Archbishop Foley, issued *Aetatis Novae* ("On Social Communications on the 20th Anniversary of *Communio et Progressio*"). It states:

"The power of media extends to defining not only what people will think but even what they will think about. Reality, for man, is what the media recognizes as real; what media do not acknowledge seems of little importance."

It goes on to urge that Christians "find ways to furnish the missing information to those deprived of it and also to give a voice to the voiceless."

This remains a primary task of Catholic media. Catholic media both provide that missing information to those deprived of it and give the church its own voice. We know that whatever one thinks of the quality of the secular media, its coverage of the church is uneven at best. At a time when Catholic leaders seek to engage the great issues

of the day, their voices often barely rise above a whisper in the secular press. And just as unfortunately, most Catholics are like non-Catholics: That is, they get their information about the church from secular media.

The church needs its own voice to engage society and be heard in the public square, but first and foremost it needs a voice to inform Catholics, helping them to see reality through Catholic eyes. It needs a voice to tell the stories that are not being told, or not being told well, and it needs a voice to mobilize Catholics.

Take any of several critical issues about which Catholic readers are likely to be well-informed *only* if they are reading about them in the Catholic press:

—The imposition on religious freedom by government regulations and mandates that affect church funding of abortion and contraception services.

—Conscience protection for medical personnel.

—A recent lawsuit filed in Chicago alleging an organization that has mercilessly attacked the church over allegations of sexual abuse is being significantly funded by attorneys profiting from sex abuse lawsuits.

—The bishops' stalwart stance in defense of the undocumented and of refugees.

—The church's decades-long support for health-care reform.

—Efforts to aid the Christian diaspora now taking place in the Middle East.

And this is just one small sample of such stories from one small slice of the news cycle.

It is also Catholic media that can mobilize Catholics, getting the word out on events of importance, whether the 40 Days for Life or last December's day of prayer for migrants and refugees. This kind of mobilization necessarily involves social media for specific events, but it is traditional news reporting, backgrounders and analyses that educate and arouse the interest of Catholics and explain what is important about an event, an issue or a public policy debate.

Forming

But information is also part of formation, which is our second task.

Being informed, seeing the world through Catholic eyes, is to increase

one's understanding of one's own faith. The task of the Catholic media is not just the who, what, where and when but also the why. The regular appearance of a Catholic publication with news, analysis, columns and features in a virtual or actual mailbox does more to help form more adult Catholics than any other method or tool.

There is an instructive quote by Nicholas Johnson that I once taped to the front of our television set, much to the displeasure of my children: "All television is educational television," he wrote. "The question is, What is it teaching?"

All media, in fact, is educational media. The question is, What is it teaching? All media is formative. The question is, How are we being formed?

It is my belief that the Catholic press in particular and Catholic media in general remain the primary means of adult faith formation in this country. While much ink has been spilled and many trees have died for documents asserting the importance of adult faith formation, the truth is that most parishes have neither the funds nor the bandwidth to provide much in the way of such formation on any sort of regular basis. And when they put something together, pastors or faith formation directors usually say they are lucky to reach 10 percent — and that is 10 percent of active parishioners.

From the point of view of Catholic news media, the formation they provide is not the same as catechetics. It is not narrowly pedantic in intent nor is it propagandistic. But in reporting on the world and in letting Catholic voices be heard unfiltered by secular media or the prevailing biases and values of the dominant culture, it plays a vital formative role more effective than any classroom. Today the Catholic press needs to be intentional in this role.

The role and responsibility of formation on the part of Catholic media were at one time a given. Publications saw that as their primary ministry in the church.

The truth is that this need for formation is greater now than ever before because Catholic readers are less formed than ever before.

Anyone who has been around Catholic educational issues for long has a favorite story about what this lack of

formation looks like. I have mine.

It was told to me by a well-regarded sociologist of religion at Purdue University, who recounted the story of a guest speaker that his department had sponsored. The speaker was a progressive-minded priest who took it upon himself to assure the audience that they could dissent and still be good Catholics. While the faculty members were all nodding along, the students were getting more and more frustrated by the talk. Finally, one of them stood up and said, "You keep telling us that we can dissent and be good Catholics, but what are we dissenting from?"

The context for the priest's oration, understood by the faculty members who had shared the priest's educational and cultural background, was lost on the students, who had neither. Even dissent, it appears, requires some basic formation in the faith.

Formation in the faith can mean many things. One catechist I know describes faith formation as "all the activities that form the human mind, body and spirit to know, love and act as God wills for all creation."

We get another definition of sorts from the National Directory for Catechesis, which lists the six tasks of catechesis:

—Promoting knowledge of the faith.

—Promoting knowledge of the meaning of the liturgy and sacraments.

—Promoting moral formation in Jesus Christ.

—Teaching the disciple how to pray with Christ.

—Preparing Christians to live in community and participate actively in the life and ministry of the church.

—Promoting a missionary spirit and vocation that prepares disciples to be present as Christians in society.

While not every article or every publication will address all these issues, one can see how a regular daily, weekly or monthly engagement with Catholic media can be seen as supportive of Catholic faith formation. Even covering controversial issues such as the current debate surrounding Communion for the divorced and remarried can be instructive about the church's teaching regarding the sacrament of marriage.

Articles about pro-life or human dignity are instructive in moral formation. News about the national and inter-

national church allows us to see how other Catholics are living out their faith in different communities. It is also an antidote to the temptation of a parish-centric congregationalism.

While Catholic media rarely present the faith in a systematic way, it is very much a presentation rooted in the real world. It shows the faith alive and relevant in our society today.

Catholic media not only can present the faith as a living reality impacting the world, but it can also be responsive to the needs of its audience in a way that is both the nature of our profession and profoundly pastoral. With the advent of social media, church communicators have a unique means of identifying and responding to what their people need or to the questions they are asking. The immediacy of Twitter, Facebook and other channels allows Catholic media to meet these needs and answer these questions quickly.

One recent example was the story late last fall about the Vatican's guidelines clarifying how to handle cremations. On the one hand, the story was nothing new for the church in the United States, which had been following such guidelines for some years. But despite that, when Catholic News Service published a story about the Roman document, our Facebook page immediately lit up with all sorts of questions about the guidelines, including some anguished comments from people quite disturbed that they had unknowingly violated them.

This provided an opportunity for CNS to cull some representative questions and then publish an FAQ with responses from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops' liturgy committee. It promoted knowledge of the faith (one of those six tasks) by being concise, authoritative and pastoral.

Another opportune area of formation in Catholic media resides in the tawdry arena of what today is being called fake news: We Catholics experienced a bit of it this past election cycle when a fabricated story claimed Pope Francis had endorsed Donald Trump for president. While those of us knowledgeable about the church — and the absolute lack of papal endorsements for any U.S. presidential candidates — were inclined to be dismissive of such misinformation, it was one of the most widely circulated

false stories of this election season.

Its popularity underscores the fact that those of us who are "Catholic professionals" often do not take seriously the challenges to the faith that average Catholics face.

We should. As a church we have been dealing with "fake news" for centuries. In the 19th century, it was Maria Monk's "awful disclosures," an anti-Catholic best-seller falsely describing lurid scandals in the convent. In the 20th century it was Alberto Rivera's wild conspiracy theories about the Jesuits and Jack Chick's comic book distortions of Catholic beliefs.

It hasn't ended in the 21st century either. On YouTube, if you go to watch a video created by CNS, you are likely to find some much less edifying videos posted on the right rail next to ours. One I recently discovered was a fundamentalist preacher declaring that "Pope Francis is the greatest false prophet of our age." YouTube's version of ecumenical dialogue, I suppose.

Catholic media can play an important role in faith formation by responding to the anti-Catholic and anti-religious allegations that many of our faithful so commonly encounter.

My youngest daughter is a freshman at a Midwestern state university. In her first semester, she was challenged both by evangelicals asking if she was born again and if she accepted Jesus as her Lord and Savior, and by the more science-minded who questioned any faith in God at all. This kind of proselytizing double-team can be overwhelming, even for a Catholic school kid. There is a need for a new kind of apologetics that is more about the formation of Catholics who will increasingly find themselves strangers in a strange land than it is about public debates with those who challenge our beliefs.

A model for the tone and content of such an apologetics and the goal of such a formation might be found in the words of Blessed John Henry Newman:

"I want a laity, not arrogant, not rash in speech, not disputatious, but men who know their religion, who enter into it, who know just where they stand, who know what they hold and what they do not, who know their creed so well that they can give an account of it, who know so much of history that they can defend it."

Inspiring

The final task assigned to Catholic media by Cardinal Foley is to inspire.

In the world of media, the inspirational story is the human interest story. These can be stories about ordinary Catholics doing extraordinary things, from founding a center to care for pregnant, unwed mothers to running a Catholic Charities office and serving the powerless.

These can also be stories of great holiness and witness. The martyrdom of Father Stanley Rather in Guatemala is an inspiring account of faith and courage, a man of heroic virtue who risked death to stand with the powerless and forgotten.

From a Catholic perspective, the power of such stories, and the need for such stories, is to show that what God asks of us, what the church teaches, can be lived out in the real world. What Pope Francis is challenging us to do — to heed the cries of the poor, to walk with the powerless, to speak for the voiceless — can in fact be done. Is being done. And that even when the church asks of us things that the world says are impossible, to make sacrifices that the world has no interest in making, it can be done. It is being done. And the lesson is that we can do it too.

To quote Cardinal Foley again, it is one of the tasks of the Catholic press to "challenge our readers to goodness." The great insight of the lay movements of the 20th century and affirmed by the Second Vatican Council is that we are all called to be saints. Holiness isn't just a job for Father or Sister. This is our job.

In his 2017 Message for the World Day of Communications, Pope Francis emphasized the notion of inspiration as part of the role of communicators. He urged communicators to "search for an open and creative style of communication that never seeks to glamorize evil but instead to concentrate on solutions and to inspire a positive and responsible approach on the part of its recipients. I ask everyone to offer the people of our time storylines that are at heart 'good news.'"

This notion of telling the "good news" is not an invitation to publish pious drivel devoid of any hint of controversy. Indeed, Pope Francis makes clear that the good news is Jesus himself, not some anodyne gloss meant to

comfort by not disturbing.

Nor should journalists, essayists and editors dumb down their content but should eschew both the saccharine and the superficial. Publishers must not shy away from contentious debates or the painful news story that the secular media is covering in full. It was Pope Benedict who told communicators that "the final worth of any communication lies in its truthfulness."

To inform, to form and to inspire should be part of the DNA of any Catholic media organization these days. This serves the church and it is part of our vocation. Both the church and media themselves need pews filled with those lay men and women that Newman described, people who know their religion, know where they stand, "know what they hold and what they do not."

In the words of Cardinal Foley once again, we should treat our readers with dignity and respect the special bond we have with them. One aspect of this relationship is recognizing that Catholic publications, websites and social media are not one-way channels of communication but serve as two-way channels. They are tools for listening as well as speaking.

The document *Aetatis Novae* stressed "the importance of the fundamental right of dialogue and information within the church." In its discussion of media, it recalls that both *Communio et Progressio* and canon law affirm that "the faithful 'are at liberty to make known their needs, especially their spiritual needs, and their wishes' to these pastors, and that the faithful, in keeping with their knowledge, competence and position, have 'the right, indeed at times the duty, to express to the pastors their views on matters concerning the good of the church.'"

In an era of social media and big data, the church has been given some unparalleled means to hear the voices of its people. While at times this may seem more headache than blessing, this is a rich pastoral resource for the church. Responsiveness to these voices can be an antidote to the alienation from societal institutions like the church that is so prevalent today. And it is a tool that editors as well as pastors can use to respond more effectively to the needs of their audiences.

I end with the same appeal I made last September in *America* magazine:

that the Catholic press is under great stress, but it remains a vital and valuable tool in service to the church. It needs the resources to flourish and to fulfill its role to inform, to form and to inspire, particularly at this time when other institutions of the church, especially the parish, are facing equally daunting challenges and are in need of a well-formed laity. Echoing an appeal made in *Aetatis Novae*, I would also hope that leaders of the church will pay attention to the professional and spiritual development of those whose vocation it is to be journalists, editors, writers, designers and videographers.

Print is not dead. Indeed, it remains for now the ultimate push technology and the surest way to provide content that will fulfill the threefold task of Catholic media. But social media, video, print and digital all are tools now available to the church to preach the Gospel and to reach modern men and women effectively.

I must believe that Cardinal Foley would today make the same point that his document *Aetatis Novae* made 25 years ago next month: "The church must continue, in spite of the many difficulties involved, to develop, maintain and foster its own specifically Catholic instruments and programs for social communications. ..."

"Catholic media work is not simply one more program alongside all the rest of the church's activities: Social communications have a role to play in every aspect of the church's mission."

Thank you. ■