

Speech for the 50th anniversary of the Western Catholic Reporter

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September 11, 2015

Edmonton, AB

Your Graces, your Excellencies, distinguished guests and friends,

First, let me thank you for the privilege of sharing this special occasion with you and for the opportunity to offer some humble thoughts on what Catholic journalism means today. One convenient aspect of this talk is that it is not about theology or doctrine. I've dodged a bullet there, don't you think. Instead, it is just one practitioner's opinion based on his many years in the business.

I start from the assumption, rather quaint perhaps in a time when we are surrounded with almost uncountable forms of mass communications, that there is a thing called Catholic journalism and it is a close relative to that other thing known as journalism, plain and simple. Secondly, this thing we call Catholic journalism is one of many valuable forms of what the Church calls "the means of social communications." Finally, this thing we call Catholic journalism has conventions and characteristics that make it a unique — and absolutely essential form of mass media for the Catholic Church today. These characteristics make it differ in form and function from other equally valuable forms of communications used by the Church.

It goes without saying that the *Western Catholic Reporter*, through its 50-year history, has been an exemplary model of Catholic journalism. In its service to readers throughout Alberta, and indeed across Canada, it has shown that high-quality reporting on news that matters, thoughtful analysis of that news and reflection deeply rooted in the spirituality and traditions of the Catholic Church are valuable aids to any Catholic who takes seriously the role the Church calls them to play in the world. If we are called to "read the signs of the times," the Catholic press is an indispensable aid.

From its beginning, in September 1965, its founders had a clear idea of what the WCR would be. To quote its founder, Archbishop Anthony Jordan of Edmonton:

The paper is not independent of the authority of the archbishop whose duty it is to see that the defined teaching of the Catholic Church in the areas of faith and morals is preserved. But the paper is independent in providing reports and a forum for discussion of the issues of the day from a Catholic viewpoint.

It should be borne in mind that in the wide area of social, economic and political subjects to be covered by the Western Catholic Reporter, the opinions expressed do not necessarily reflect the mind of the archbishop.

I do not believe that those in authority in the church should control the flow of information. Consequently, I have entrusted to the editor the responsibility for the editorial content and operation of the paper.

To that end, Archbishop Jordan appointed Doug Roche as its first editor. He set the tone with a feisty, opinionated and passionate newspaper. And his shoes have been ably filled in recent years by Glen Argan. Indeed, I have learned much over the years from observing Glen in action.

To the average person, what the Archbishop described would not seem terribly revolutionary. Isn't that what any good journalistic organization strives to be? Yet for many this model was rare and maybe a bit questionable for an organization such as the Catholic Church to sponsor.

Yet here was the Archbishop laying the foundations for his newspaper, based on what was commonly understood to be good journalistic principles at the time. Was he wrong or right? That's what I want to address tonight.

But maybe I should stop here and define my terms. What is "Catholic journalism"? And how is it different from that other kind we all know and love?

There is no doubt that it is different. When I left my daily newspaper in Kitchener some years ago to become Editor and Publisher of The Catholic Register, one of my colleagues asked me: "Why are you leaving journalism?" He said this bluntly with an expression that suggested I had just gone over to the dark side. For journalists see themselves as having a holy calling of sorts. Some of you might remember Woodward and Bernstein and the Watergate scandal. Those Washington Post reporters filled journalism schools for the next generation with idealistic young people who wanted to change the world. There are still vestiges of this today in some attitudes and prejudices among working journalists. One of them is that people who leave journalism to go into other forms of communication work have "sold out", or become shills for "The Man." Those of us from a certain generation know who "The Man" is. In 1995, my colleagues, even if they didn't express it, certainly believed I was going to work for The Man in the white collar. To them, that wasn't journalism, that was PR.

Happily, my career at The Register demonstrated that Catholic journalism was every bit as real as the secular variety. And though I worked for "The Man" in the collar, he was a much more understanding and thoughtful boss than most of those corporate executives who run mass media outlets today.

But I digress. Let me quickly lay out what I believe makes for good journalism. Then I will add a few more points to say what makes good journalism Catholic. The two are really not that far apart.

Good journalism:

- seeks truth
- has a passion for accuracy
- strives for balance in presenting competing opinions or views
- exhibits compassion for the weak

- strives to fairly and accurately reflect the community it covers back to its readers
- believes there is value in public debate and competing opinions
- values good, concise writing

Notice I do not include “objectivity” in that list. I don’t think that is humanly possible, given that all of us bring certain intellectual baggage and opinions to any topic. No matter how hard we try, it is nearly impossible to put that baggage into some kind of “blind trust” that won’t have an impact on the journalist’s reporting. This is why I say, “strives for balance,” which I believe is more honest in the long run.

You could say that all those things would be part of what any Catholic journalist values too. What makes him or her different is both very simple and very profound. We believe in the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, the Son of God and that He came for the salvation of the world. And we belong to this global community of faith called the Church.

How does this make us different?

For one thing, we believe that life has an ultimate purpose and that there is a grand story, in which we all play a small part. In other words, each of the people we write about is Very Important Indeed. The very fact that we are made in the image of God makes it so. Each of us has an inherent dignity that deserves respect, especially when they are the subject of a newspaper article or broadcast news item.

Secondly, there is a larger purpose to our journalism. It is at the service of Truth with a capital T. In choosing what to print, what stories to put on front page, what quotes to use, what letters to the editor to publish, what photos to highlight, we strive to say something about the world that is shaped by our beliefs as expressed in the Creed. Our history is not, as Arnold Toynbee once observed, “one damn thing after another.” It is part of a universal plan.

Thirdly, it is about reflecting our community to both itself and the outside world. If our community doesn’t recognize itself in our pages, warts and all, we are not performing the service we should. We are of no use to anyone if we are not a credible source of information. That means meeting the highest ideals of professional journalism regarding my list above.

There is another aspect of that worth mentioning. Increasingly, today’s Catholics find themselves challenged to not be absorbed culturally and intellectually into the broader philosophy of secular society. The markers that identify us as Catholics are disappearing from our daily lives: crucifixes, prayer before meals, simple blessings, references to saints, etc. are not just empty rituals, but tangible, sensual connections with what we believe and how we think of ourselves as Catholics. For a Catholic newspaper, that means connecting readers with the daily life of being Catholic: the liturgical year and milestones of growing up Christian.

Let me illustrate what I mean by each of these.

1. We treat people as people, not objects to reveal to the world for its examination. In daily journalism, one's deepest secrets are fair game for exposure regardless of the harm they might do to the individual. When I interviewed someone for *The Register*, I worked hard to discern whether certain facts were necessary for the story, even if they were juicy tidbits. Did my subject's parentage really add to the story? Their physical disabilities or appearance? Would reporting such facts cause such harm that it would outweigh any good the story would do? These are not questions asked in daily secular journalism. We asked them and based our decisions on them.
2. In choosing articles, we didn't seek controversy for its own sake. Sometimes controversy is a necessary part of public debate. Some things are, indeed, controversial and should be debated. But we chose articles for their ability to allow us to draw on our own faith and its traditions to say something deeper about our existence. I got into deep trouble from my readers once for running, on our Christmas issue, a very contemporary painting of the Virgin Mother with her Child as if she were a street person on a park bench. In my view, this was certainly in line with the nativity story of the manger, but for many readers, this was showing disrespect for the Blessed Virgin. In my view, it was a stark reminder of why Jesus came into the world.
3. The business of reflecting our community is one of the greatest challenges of the Catholic editor. You don't want your pages to be monopolized by cranks or people with hidden agendas. At the same time, if these very same pages don't display some of the give and take that truly exists in the Catholic community, the newspaper will lose all credibility — and hence its value to its readers and to the Church. One of the most visible places where this plays out is the Letters to the Editor. I would receive far more letters than I could print. Each week I would choose somewhere between 10 and 20 per cent of the letters for publication. I would weed out those that were obviously libelous or simply cruel and disrespectful toward others. Any that were handwritten in a stilted block letters, single-spaced, full of underlined phrases and dotted with exclamation marks and tiny skulls and crossbones, would be eliminated. If the letter were simply a copy of something that had also been sent to 300 world leaders, including the Queen of England, I would set it aside. If the letter contained opinions that were based on facts that were demonstrably false, it would be set aside.
4. But that still left a lot of letters. And here is where it became tricky. I would try to pick a representative sample, including traditionalists and progressives, men and women, those from different ethnic backgrounds. As long as they expressed themselves courteously and didn't contradict Church dogma, I would try to find a way to get them in. It was a delicate balancing act and, in some ways, very subjective. I would be criticized more for my choice of letters to the editor than anything else in the paper. I was too conservative, a closet liberal, a heretic. Some weeks I was accused of holding completely contradictory opinions and using my influential position to secretly promote them at the expense of the truth. During such times, I felt I was getting it about right.
5. Reflecting our community also meant reflecting its rhythms, seasons and important occasions. Where people are gathered demonstrates what they believe is important. Hence the reports on feasts, celebrations, Lent and Advent, ordinations, etc. These

events offer a framework that puts the other stories into a lived context and allows readers to put them into perspective. This is different than in mainstream media, where there is little to discern the importance of one event from another. Hence in the secular world, Tom Brady's involvement in under-inflated footballs carries the same weight as a nuclear energy treaty with Iran. Catholic journalism helps people understand what is important and what is not.

I'd like to add a note about the relationship between me as Editor/Publisher and the sole shareholder of the newspaper, that is the Archbishop of Toronto. He was officially chair of the board of directors of The Catholic Register and, as such, my boss. During most of my time at The Register, this position was held by Cardinal Aloysius Ambrozic. The Cardinal was known as a tough, eastern European intellectual, a conservative on doctrine, a disciplinarian with his clergy. He was all of these. He was also someone who understood the value of an arm's length newspaper — and, thank God, human frailty. When inevitably, someone came to him with complaints about the Register, he would just as inevitably send them to me to handle as I felt best. He never questioned my judgment on how I resolved those disputes. But when he felt I had done something that was either inaccurate or unfair, he informed me immediately. I would get a call from his secretary: "The Cardinal would like to see you now." and that meant "The Cardinal would like to see you NOW." I would go up to his office and he would tell me quite bluntly how stupid I had been. Depending on the issue, I would agree, or I might argue the point. Occasionally, I won. But he never told me how to handle a particular story or to suppress anything.

Case in point: An auxiliary bishop had been accused of sexual impropriety and the police were investigating. Cardinal Ambrozic invoked archdiocesan policy and the bishop was removed from his post until the investigation was complete. I wanted to report on the incident in the very next issue. We discussed it in advance and the Cardinal, despite some misgivings, let me do it. He was always willing to let me make my own mistakes. In the end, we ran a small item, roughly 3 paragraphs, on page 3. We did it before the secular media. The very fact that the Catholic paper was able to run this article demonstrated that the archdiocese had a clear and transparent policy for such matters and that it took its responsibility seriously. In this case, Catholic journalism did its job.

So what can be concluded from all this? One, that a community, whether a community of citizens or a community of faith, needs a forum in which its members can talk to each other, share their commonly cherished beliefs and exchange their differing opinions. This is a necessary element of a healthy, engaged flock. Two, Catholic journalism, whether in the form of a traditional newspaper, or in some new digital evolution, with its own conventions and ideals, can provide this forum. In fact, being rooted in the faith and tradition of The Catholic Church gives it the foundation to ensure the forum is of lasting value to its readers.

I will let Archbishop Jordan have the last word on this subject:

Pope John XXIII declared in his outstanding encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*, that the right to

information is among the "universal, inviolable, unalterable" rights of the human person. Moreover, everyone has "the right to freedom in searching for truth and in expressing and communicating his opinions." This thought will be the keystone of the Western Catholic Reporter.

As with the WCR, it should be the keystone of good Catholic journalism wherever it may be found.

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