

Catholic Press Congress
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Thank you for this honor of speaking with you about the challenges faced by the Catholic press in the United States.

The Catholic press has been my professional vocation for 30 years. I have served as a correspondent in several cities, including Rome, where I covered the Vatican for Catholic News Service for three years. I have worked for three different national Catholic companies, and have been president of Our Sunday Visitor for 10 years. Our company has many facets, including six publications, 2,300 book, e-book and textbook titles, and a presence in Catholic bookstores, parishes and schools. Our largest book distributor is Amazon. We have the largest of the national Catholic news weeklies. We also have an active web site with blogs, and we have an active Twitter and Facebook presence as well.

I tell you this only as a way of showing that I have been thinking about our challenges as a U.S. Catholic publisher for a very long time.

There is an old joke applicable to our profession: How does one make a small fortune in the Catholic press? Answer: Start with a big fortune.

It has been a very challenging field really since the Second Vatican Council, but most certainly since the 1990s. In the United States, Mass attendance, attendance at Catholic schools, numbers of priestly vocations, marriages, Baptisms and more have all drifted lower. Most surveys suggest that Catholic practice is in decline, but the large influx of primarily Catholic immigrants from Mexico and other Latin countries has kept our numbers relatively stable.

On the surface our Catholic media remains quite vital. There are an estimated 300 Catholic print publications available today, including: four major national weekly papers, the largest of which is Our Sunday Visitor Newsweekly; 140 diocesan newspapers; more than 100 magazines and major newsletters; as well as publications in Spanish and other languages. There is also one major Catholic television network, EWTN, and more than 160 Catholic radio stations. And there are dozens of Catholic book publishers.

But appearances can be deceiving.

Most of the mainstream Catholic publications have been under great financial stress, and those which are not owned by dioceses have generally seen a decline. Diocesan newspapers often

benefit from a circulation mandate of some sort, by which the diocese compels the purchase of its newspaper, but we are also seeing a decline there as well.

There are many ways to examine the challenges facing the Catholic press. Of course the Internet has had an impact, making a great deal of information of varying degrees of quality available instantaneously. Other factors include the changing demography of the Catholic readership, with fewer young people interested in Catholic news, and the rising costs for mainstream companies who must utilize more diverse means of distribution and communication while business models are either unclear or rapidly changing.

Many of these same issues plague our colleagues in the secular press as well.

I think that three additional factors that tend not to be addressed as often in forums such as these include:

1. The decline in knowledge about the faith.
2. A growing distrust of institutions.
3. A resulting decline in Catholic identity.

The first factor is that we now have two generations of Catholics who have been significantly under-catechized in their own faith. A larger and larger share of our potential audience often does not understand Catholic vocabulary or Catholic concepts. A recent survey documenting the lack of religious knowledge among Americans said that a majority of Catholics do not know what the Church teaches about the Eucharist, for example.

I had a personal encounter with this ignorance a few days ago here in Rome.

At the Basilica of San Clemente, an archeological treasure where the entire history of Christianity is represented in its many levels, my colleague and I met a young, bright, good looking American couple who had stopped us to ask us some questions about the church.

It started with simple questions such as, "What do the keys on the papal coat of arms stand for?" But with each answer, they had another question: "Is it true Constantine was the first pope?" they asked. "Didn't he kill all the pagans?" "What is liturgy?"

It turned out that both young people were baptized and raised as Catholics. They went to Catholic schools. As adults, they left the Church, our Church, and have become non-denominational Christians.

The encounter reminded me of a statement by the former chair of the theology department of the University of Notre Dame, Dr. John Cavadini, who bemoaned "the religious illiteracy of so

many otherwise well-educated young Catholics” at Catholic universities. “This vast ignorance,” he wrote, “is not just a question of missing bits of information, retinal holes marring an otherwise excellent field of vision. It is something more like a retinal detachment, a whole field of vision pulling inexorably away toward blindness. Not only are the words gone, the bits of information, but the system in which the words made sense is failing.”

This is not only a problem for young people. In fact, many Catholic publications are dependent on a shrinking older audience that still retains a knowledge of Catholic concepts and terminology, while many Catholics young and old have a poor understanding of what the Church teaches and why it teaches it.

The second factor is that there is in our country a profound distrust of institutions, including the Church. While the sexual abuse crisis has perhaps made this worse for the Church, it is not the root cause. It is an impulse that transcends religious identification. In his provocative last book called “Ill Fares the Land,” historian Tony Judt identified lack of trust among citizens and between citizens and their government as a problem that is particularly acute in the United States, and has impacted wide swaths of public policy and electoral politics.

In the Church, this has led to a kind of congregationalism, where Catholics may like their priest and their parish, but feel less of a bond with the bishop or national and international Catholic institutions. This suspicion of institutions is shared by the secular media, which is where most Catholics get most of their knowledge about their own Church. The result is both a latent suspicion of Church authorities and a lack of a felt need to know what the Church is saying about social or spiritual matters, two primary reasons to read the Catholic press.

Both of these factors lead to a third factor: That the Catholic identity of our people is eroding. Catholics are more likely today to move over to Protestant or non-denominational churches if they see something they prefer. They view all churches as more or less the same. What has been true for decades among Protestants may now be becoming true for Catholics: Denominational identity is waning. Years ago, this was unimaginable. The lack of knowledge of the faith has led in turn to an inability to distinguish what is truly unique about the faith. This also means that there is less of an impulse to seek out Catholic-identified books and publications.

While these factors pose significant challenges for all Catholic publishers in the United States, I think that there are positive developments as well.

First, the Internet is allowing us to reach diverse portions of our audience in a relatively cost-effective way. Catholic use of the Internet is significant and growing, and Catholics who use the Internet also tend to read more books and more publications than others. Google Directory

lists 52,700 sites in its “Catholic” category and 7,800 “Catholic” blogs, but this is probably only a fraction of the real presence of Catholics on the web.

While usage of digital means of communications is constantly changing, more and more Catholics are accessible, at least in theory, through these means. What is critically important is that the information they receive is of sound quality, but the means of oversight that the Church has exerted over traditional media does not work nearly as well for the new media. Without editorial or institutional accountability, the risk is a Babel of voices claiming to be Catholic.

Second, some of the crises that have afflicted the Church, most particularly the sexual abuse crisis, are forcing changes in how the Church communicates. Church leaders have become increasingly aware that most of their flock gets its news about its own Church from the secular media, and that media is often an unreliable source.

My hope is that Church leaders are seeing that if they value their own media, and if they allow them to be transparent and honest, they will gain in credibility over the long haul. To do this well, however, will mean changing the media expectations of an institution that often sees its first responsibility to protect itself from bad news.

Third, I believe that there is now arriving a generation of Catholic editors, writers and publishers who understand the role they must play in bolstering Catholic identity. This does not mean becoming mere propagandists, but it does mean becoming collaborators with the Church, recognizing that professional news coverage and solid features and special reports can genuinely help the adult faith formation of our Catholic audience.

Pope Benedict, during his recent trip to England, quoted 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.”

What Cardinal Newman called for is what we as U.S. publishers not only need, but can help to shape: An informed Catholic laity ready and willing to engage the world, and who see the value of the Catholic press – whether in print or digital – as a means of deepening their own understanding of the faith and seeing their world, their culture, their society through the lens of this faith.

Thank you.