



What does it mean to be a Catholic Media Organization in Today's World?

As the media environment is rapidly evolving due to the influence of social media, the bishops of the United States have noted with growing concern a lack of unity and civility in the material being produced not only by secular media, but also by Catholic media.

In an attempt to respond to this, an ad hoc committee of the USCCB was formed. In their discussion, the bishops of this ad hoc committee suggested that a dialogue with Catholic media professionals might help restore some sense of unity and collaboration. The committee made this request to the USCCB Communication Committee. The Communication Committee, in turn, asked for some time at the annual Catholic Media Convention, which draws members of the Catholic Press Association of the United States and Canada and the Catholic Academy of Communication Arts Professionals.

Receiving a favorable response from the boards of the two associations, the Committee then asked the staff of the USCCB to develop a process. The desired outcome of the process was to identify areas of collaboration and minimize areas of tension.

Invitations were extended to the bishops who serve on the Communication Committee and to those bishops who had served on the ad hoc committee to participate in a panel discussion at the convention. An invitation was also made to the chair of the Communication Commission for the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops. Five bishops accepted the invitation.

The USCCB staff held phone conference calls with the bishops who had accepted the invitation. Based on those calls, a text was prepared for a bishop to deliver on the first day of the convention. The text provided a basic understanding of how the bishops, collectively, perceived the role of Catholic media organizations, their expectations of collaboration and their understanding of the responsibilities and challenges for Catholic media. (A copy of the text is attached.)

The bishop's presentation ended with four questions for the journalists present at the convention:

1. How can Catholic media in North America (U.S. and Canada) best serve our Catholic faithful? What are the particular challenges we should be considering?
2. How can Catholic media maintain its integrity as journalists? What are the journalistic standards for a Catholic who also sees himself/herself as having a vocation as a media professional in the Church?

3. How do these issues change when looked at in the context of the 21st century media environment, with Internet and bloggers? What other issues arise? What does it mean to be a universal church in a global communication environment?
4. When does an organization cease being a Catholic news organization? What are the boundaries between being a Catholic news organization and a Catholic public relations agency?

The journalists were asked to reflect on these questions, provide their initial responses, and then pose questions for the bishops. These responses and questions were written, and gathered by the USCCB staff.

The staff sorted through the questions from the journalists and found that the majority fell into three areas. The panel of bishops was made aware of the categories of questions, and spent a short period of time (due to time constraints) discussing, among themselves, possible responses.

On the following morning, before an audience of the journalists who were present at the convention, the panel of bishops responded to the three main areas of concern, as expressed by the journalists. There was also about 30 minutes provided for questions from the audience.

Both bishops and journalists committed to ongoing conversations and other activities to further the work. These may include: developing guidelines or best practices for the expectations of bishops and Catholic journalists, identifying areas where additional dialogue is needed, and identifying topics and venues for educational opportunities.

Some of these suggested activities will be presented to the Canadian and American bishops' communication committees in the upcoming months. It is anticipated that time will be again dedicated to this dialogue at the next Catholic Media Convention.

“What does it mean to be a faithful Catholic media organization in the 21st Century?”

**Bishop Gabino Zavala
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Introduction

I am very happy that we have a chance to have this conversation about what makes for a faithful Catholic media organization. I think this is a crucial question for the Church in North America in this time of unprecedented changes in media and telecommunications. It seems every month there is a new website or technology that appears. No one can keep up with everything. Not even we bishops, known as we are for our technical expertise!!

All joking aside, I want to say very clearly that we bishops do not approach this conversation as if we have “the answer” to the question of what it means to be a faithful Catholic media organization. Rather, we are looking forward to a positive, constructive exchange of ideas. We expect to learn from you and your expertise as people immersed daily in the realm of media. Nor do we expect that there is a “one-size-fits-all” answer. But we do believe there is much to be learned by exploring the question together.

“Faithful” Catholic Media – What is it Not

To sharpen our focus, let me start by saying what a faithful Catholic media is not. Today's secular media culture is often competitive and can have little regard for the damage done to people's lives and reputations. There is a tendency to be mean-spirited and engage in personal attacks. Many times the secular media present only a superficial rendering of a story, often choosing what is sensationalist over in-depth reporting.

While I think we can all agree that we do not want to see any of these qualities in our own publications, programs or Web sites, I think we have to admit that at times they are present. Avoiding them requires ongoing vigilance, since secular media and its influence are vast.

I also do not think that we should go to the other extreme and simply say that faithful Catholic media organizations are those who engage in apologetics to defend bishops at all costs. That is too simplistic and does not respect the intelligence of Catholics in North America. They deserve a Catholic media that takes a more nuanced perspective.

Lastly, I do not believe that faithful Catholic media organizations should present themselves as speaking for the Magisterium. Only the Magisterium can speak for the

Magisterium. While this sounds self-evident, it bears saying because there appear to be some organizations who do not see this point.

Elements of a “Faithful” Catholic Media

I want to now shift to talking about the elements of a faithful Catholic media organization. As I said at the beginning of the talk, there is not a “one-size-fits-all” formula and I cannot give a comprehensive list of characteristics. But there certainly are elements worth pointing out.

Let's begin with the idea that faithful Catholic media organizations work from a perspective of being part of the Catholic community, not outside it. This carries two assumptions:

- First, Catholic media should work from a Catholic perspective, not the so-called “objective” perspective of the secular media (and of course we know that secular media are not objective anyway). I believe that it is crucial to have media with a distinctly Catholic voice that offers the unique Catholic perspective on the world and humanity.
- Second, Catholic media has a responsibility to the larger Catholic community. Two useful words here are “loyalty” and “service.” As I said before, I am not suggesting that Catholic media should engage purely in apologetics. Rather, I think that faithful Catholic media organizations are loyal in that they wish to see the Church succeed and care about its health and well-being. Their service to the Church is to report the truth, because the truth does set us free. Their loyalty is their care about the Church’s well-being, from its most vulnerable members to the community as a whole. So I am suggesting that the faithful Catholic media organization is one that both reports the truth and does so with an eye to how that reporting can best serve the Church.

At their core, Catholic media organizations have two main roles to play in our Church: to inform and to teach.

1. To Inform: This is the most basic and obvious role – keeping Catholics informed about local and global events in the Church – and many of you are already do this very well. There are so many wonderful stories in our large, diverse Church, stories that only Catholic media can cover. As you cover these stories, I want to encourage you to move beyond just reporting news. Rather, I would hope that you would situate your reporting within Peter 3:15 and report within a context of how to give hope.
2. Teach: Catholic media has a second, unique role of teaching and helping Catholics to deepen their understanding of their faith and how it is lived out in the world. To do this requires that Catholic media be staffed by people who are theologically trained and able to use media to effectively teach. As bishops we are concerned that this is not always the case. And so we must challenge Catholic media to make this investment. And we bishops must be willing to help with this as well. I hope that our conversation today and tomorrow will identify ways in which we can collaborate in this area.

Catholic Media – Tackling Difficult Subjects

Of course, sometimes the truth that must be reported is not easy. We are all aware that we are living in challenging times for the Church. So what is the role of the faithful Catholic media organization in the context of scandal and other difficult and divisive stories?

I believe that we cannot be afraid to name the truth of what is happening. Our Catholic people are intelligent and they want and appreciate getting the “straight scoop.” However, there are several things that we bishops are looking for when Catholic media tell difficult stories.

The first is to adopt a basic principle of “Speak the truth in love.” Speak the truth out of a love for the Church, and a love for the people of God. There also has to be a place for mercy. All too often, secular media seems to seek the destruction of individuals when they are caught in a mistake. This is not what our Lord taught us. And so this is something Catholic media can teach the secular media – how to report divisive or scandalous stories in a spirit of love and mercy. To do this, we have to have a “nose for grace” and a conviction that God turns everything to the good. So even in the midst of dark and depressing stories Catholic media can be asking, “What is the potential for good in all of this?”

Second, Catholic media should always proceed with humility and civility. The humility comes from the realization that none of us have all the facts of a story. There are always other perspectives beyond our own. Committing to civility means moving away from positions of attacking or being defensive so that genuine dialogue and exchange can take place. It is OK to point out when mistakes are made. As humans, all of us make mistakes. But I think that when Catholic media point out mistakes, it must be done with fairness and civility.

Third, we hope that Catholic media will always work to present Church teaching fairly and accurately. It is fair to present multiple opinions on a topic. But we hope that Catholic media would present the Church's position accurately.

What Makes Catholic Media Unique

I deeply believe Catholic media has a unique role to play in our Church and as a witness in our secular society. In particular, I want to emphasize three unique and vital roles for Catholic media.

First, in a world with a plethora of media outlets, many of whom are delivering news and commentary about the Church, the role for Catholic media has never been more important. We need a Catholic media that can help Catholics (and everyone) understand what is happening in our world and our church from a Catholic perspective. The more information and data there is out there, the greater the need for interpretation – how do we make sense of it all? What does this mean, to be holding one's iPhone in

one hand and the Gospel in the other? How does the information in one device mesh with what has been handed down in our faith? And this is a vital role that only *Catholic* media can fulfill.

The second unique role for Catholic media is to model a civil and respectful media. As I said earlier, secular media often falls into a trap of being cynical, disrespectful and sensationalist. Whatever is rudest or most sensational is what they often gravitate to. Catholic media can model what a civil, substantive media can and should be. Civil, substantive media pursues and presents stories of substance and depth that enrich all of our lives. This is very important in today's media culture.

As I talked with my brother bishops in preparation for this presentation, there was consistent agreement that one aspect that is most alarming to us about media is when it becomes unchristian and hurtful to individuals. For example, we are particularly concerned about blogs that engage in attacks and hurtful, judgmental language. We are very troubled by blogs and other elements of media that assume the role of Magisterium and judge others in the Church. Such actions shatter the communion of the Church that we hold so precious.

The third unique role for Catholic media is to provide bishops with guidance about how to best engage with media organizations. You are much more practiced in this area than we are. And so we need your help. I know we are not always the best students in this area, but we need your input and guidance. Let's talk about how we bishops can do a better job of letting you help us in the area of media.

Relationship with secular media

I also want to take a moment to discuss Catholic media's relationship with secular media. The time has passed when the Church could either ignore the secular media or expect that the secular media would give the Church the benefit of the doubt. So it is crucial that we as a Church recognize that we have to engage and educate the secular media. Otherwise, we will continue to be saddled with depictions of our Church in the popular press that are inaccurate and unflattering. And these in turn influence many Catholics, especially those who are not currently participating in our Church.

We bishops have a key role in improving the Church's relations with the secular media. But so do you. Catholic media can help educate the secular media about our Church and its realities. We have such a rich tradition that it is difficult for non-Catholics to grasp it. So there is a great need to help secular media better understand our Church, in the hopes they will be able to more accurately report on it.

As their media colleagues, Catholic media is an excellent position to provide this education for secular media. To do this will require cultivating relationships with the secular media. And then taking additional steps to educate them about Catholic issues and provide useful background and depth on Catholic stories. Of course, there is no

guarantee of success in this effort. But we bishops believe it is one that is well worth taking on.

What Catholic Media should expect from Bishops

In this talk I have identified some hopes and expectations that we bishops have of Catholic media. But you also have a right to have expectations of us as bishops. It is essential that we strengthen our collaboration – and good collaboration requires efforts on both sides.

Sadly, the reality of the current economic times means that we bishops are not in a position to offer increased financial support to Catholic media. But there are three things that you have a right to ask of us:

1. Spirit of Collaboration: You have a right to expect that we bishops and our diocesan offices should view your organizations as collaborators, rather than as outsiders.
2. Access and Support: We bishops recognize the value of Catholic media, and should be doing everything we can to help you succeed. That means providing access to both the people and the information that you need to get your questions answered when you are working on a story.
3. Quick Response: The world of media moves at an incredible speed and we bishops need to recognize that. Often you are working on a deadline. Providing a response to your request after your deadlines is often of little help, so we must learn to respond quickly.

Conclusion and Questions that we bring to the conversation

As I said at the outset, we bishops do not have all the answers. We are here for a dialogue and as learners as much as teachers. I hope you have found the ideas I presented to be helpful. And now we want to hear from you.

I have four questions that we bishops would like to hear your thoughts on. They are:

- a. How can Catholic media in North America (US and Canada) best serve our Catholic faithful? What are the particular challenges we should be looking at?
- b. How can Catholic media maintain its integrity as journalists? What are the journalistic standards for a Catholic who also sees himself/herself as having a vocation as a media professional in the Church? Or one who is operating as a media professional?
- c. How do these issues change when looked at in the context of the 21st century media environment, with Internet and bloggers? What other issues arise? What does it mean to be a universal church in a global communication environment?
- d. When does an organization cease being a Catholic news organization? What are the boundaries between being a Catholic news organization and a Catholic public relations agency?