



## Catholics and the “Fourth Estate”

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As part of a White House press strategy to create good will before the president meets Pope Benedict XVI later this week, President Obama recently met with a variety of Catholic journalists and editors. His goal was a sensible one: to favorably influence American Catholic opinion through their Catholic publications.

One of the more curious questions President Obama got came from a Catholic editor who asked if the president was ready to “write off” America’s Catholic bishops, or at least some of them, because they so often seem critical of his views. This sounds a bit like a court flatterer asking a disappointed Caesar if he was ready to “write off” Peter and Paul. But of course, suggesting that sort of unhappy parallel wouldn’t be fair, at least to the president.

Nonetheless, there’s a lesson here that suits our purposes tonight. All smart leaders try to use the news media to advance their agendas. And depending on who the leader is – John F. Kennedy comes to mind, but I could easily name others -- media professionals can be very eager to help. America’s news media have enormous opinion-shaping power. Therefore it’s vital for Catholics to understand how the media work, and especially how they work *on us*.

Here’s a simple fact: You and I have just begun a relationship. The moment you started listening to me, we struck a deal. You agreed to give me your attention. I agreed to give you my opinions. It’s a pretty common arrangement. But sometimes it can have unhelpful consequences.

Most of what we know about the world comes from people we’ll never meet and don’t really understand. We don’t even think of them as individuals. Instead we usually talk about them in the collective – as “the media” or “the press.” Yet behind every Los Angeles Times editorial or Fox News broadcast are human beings with personal opinions and prejudices. These people select and frame the news. And when we read their newspaper articles or tune in their TV shows, we engage them in a kind of intellectual intimacy in the same way you’re listening to me right now.

This isn’t necessarily a bad practice. Most readers who follow the columns of George Will or Paul Krugman do so because they share the author’s views or because they want to know what the other side is saying. And because Will and Krugman are both opinion journalists, we *expect* them to argue a certain set of ideas.

In like manner, anyone reading my own writings gets a pretty clear sense, pretty quickly, of how I think about issues. As a Catholic bishop, I belong to a believing community with a widely accessible and carefully articulated understanding of the world.

In contrast, we usually know very little about the person who writes an unsigned editorial or the people who create the nightly news. And that’s worth talking about. Here’s why. In an information society, the people who shape our information control the public conversation.

Brightly colored network logos and imposing newspaper mastheads carry with them a kind of “soft imperialism.” The New York Times, for example, has a front page that claims to offer “all the news that’s fit to print.” And whether we revere *The New York Times* or think it’s full of more nonsense than honest news doesn’t seem to matter. Like it or not, most of us define the “news” by what

receives the most attention from a handful of major media. When we learn key phrases or statistics about issues of public importance, it's through their repetition in those same news media.

Most people who follow the news, for instance, can probably tell you that about 46 million Americans lack health insurance. But most of those same people have little or no grasp of the very different reasons for *why* 46 million Americans lack health insurance – because that story gets much less attention.

Many of the reporters I talk with try to be diligent and fair. Many succeed. The best reporters remember that journalism is a vocation. They know that their work demands more than just the contractual duties of their job. They realize that they have an obligation to the public – a duty to illuminate public discourse by presenting the facts of a story in a full and truthful context, regardless of the intellectual fashions of the moment.

Unfortunately, too many news professionals don't live up to this standard. And some, quite candidly, don't seem to try.

The media's power to shape public thought is why it's so vital for the rest of us to understand their human element. When we don't recognize the personal chemistry of the men and women who bring us our news – their cultural and political views, their economic pressures, their social ambitions – then we fail the media by holding them to too low a standard. We also – and much more importantly -- fail ourselves by neglecting to think and act as intelligent citizens.

In thinking about the media, and especially the news media, one of the first things we need to understand is how technology has fundamentally changed their nature. Once upon a time, "up to the minute news" meant a newspaper with both morning and evening editions. Today, the internet and cable news networks swim in a constant churn of breaking events. The newspaper – and in a sense, all print media – have lost the technology war. This is a sea change in American life.

America was born as a nation of readers; a nation of the printed word. The foundational defenses of our constitutional order, *The Federalist Papers*, first appeared as newspaper articles. The 85 essays are remarkable exercises in political philosophy. They're done with an intellectual skill unmatched anywhere in the modern news media. Unfortunately, if they appeared today, few of us might read them. The reason is simple. Reading requires discipline and mental effort. But for the past 50 years our culture has been shifting away from the printed word to visual communications, which are much more inclined to sensation and passive consumption. This has consequences. When a print culture dies, the ideas, institutions and even habits of public behavior built on that culture begin to weaken.

Visual and electronic media, today's dominant media, need a certain kind of content. They thrive on brevity, speed, change, urgency, variety and feelings. But thinking requires the opposite. Thinking takes time. It needs silence and the methodical skills of logic. Today's advances in technology have increased the sources of human information that the average layperson can access. That's a good thing. But they've also undermined the intellectual discipline that we once had when our main tools of communication were books or print publications. This is *not* a good development. In fact, it's a very dangerous thing in a democracy, which is a form of government that demands intellectual and moral maturity from its citizens to survive.

Now, we can't wish away breakthroughs in technology any more than we can unlearn the rules of mathematics. Nor should we want to. Social media like Facebook and Twitter may shorten our attention spans, but – as recent events in Iran showed us – they can also be a very powerful force for publicizing the truth and pursuing justice.

We need to remember that material progress is never an unmixed blessing. It gives, and it takes away. And it always has unintended consequences, which means we need to be more – not less – vigilant about the way our news media form us, and how their influence shapes the content of our public life. Just as a rich society can grow callous to the suffering of the poor, so an information-addicted society can lose track of the purpose of its information. In the case of the news profession, its main purpose is to accurately inform a public dialogue that pursues the good, the right and the true.

This is why it's so damaging when the mass media confuse fame with significance. A talk show host like Larry King can welcome a head of state into his studio one night and a pop star the next. A news broadcast may give enormous time to a celebrity murder trial in Los Angeles and then ignore

the murder of dozens of religious believers abroad. Michael Jackson's death has dwarfed the rest of the world's news for a week. By blurring the line between news and entertainment, between what's really important and what's merely sensational, the media engage in a dumbing-down of public discourse. They implicitly raise up the trivial and diminish things that really matter.

Most good journalists know this, and they don't like it. But news executives typically justify their selection of stories by pointing out that, after all, they're running a business – and there's a very big market for the cheesier coverage.

Of course that's true, but news organizations can't have it both ways. They can't claim to be impartial guardians of truth in American political life and then act like celebrity groupies at the same time. The appetite for tabloid-style news does not mean anyone should be feeding it. And when they do feed it, news organizations undermine the dignity of their profession and lower the seriousness of public debate.

The second thing we should understand about our news media is this. While they need to focus on important issues, they also need to focus on them *with a right spirit*. In other words, journalists need to remember their profession's proper role in America's public order. The press is the only field besides religion explicitly singled out for protection by the First Amendment. Thomas Jefferson, writing during his presidency, put the importance of a free press this way: "No experiment can be more interesting than that we are now trying, and which we trust will end in establishing the fact, that man may be governed by reason and truth. Our first object should therefore be, to leave open to him all the avenues to truth. The most effectual hitherto found, is the freedom of the press."

Jefferson's words are striking because their defense of a free press emphasizes that freedom is a means and not an end in itself. Notice what he defines as the purpose of press freedom: *the reason and truth needed for self-government*. But in our own time, the news establishment – even when discussing serious issues – often seems less interested in reason and truth than in what Christopher Lasch called "ideological gestures;" in other words, sound bites and tribal slogans designed to shape our thought rather than encourage it.

When Jefferson wrote his famous lines, the United States had a citizenship that was overwhelmingly and actively Christian. The idea of truth for the average American had objective, commonly held meaning. Today that shared understanding of truth is gone. One of the reasons is that our people have changed. Americans are still a heavily Christian people, at least in a nominal way. But our country now also includes many other religious believers and non-believers. In a nation that took the natural law seriously, this religious diversity would be an engine for real social virtue. The great Jesuit defender of the American experiment, John Courtney Murray, argued that the natural law – the idea that human nature is hardwired with universal, basic understandings of right and wrong – gave all Americans a common language for their democracy, regardless of their creed.

But today our knowledge classes – the people who shape our universities, think tanks, mass media and political party leaderships -- no longer believe in the natural law. In fact, they're often very fuzzy about what those two words – "human nature" -- even mean. They also tend to distrust religion in general and Christianity in particular. And that has consequences.

Today a conservative Republican can watch Fox News, listen to talk radio, read the editorial pages of the Wall Street Journal, or skim National Review's website without finding an opinion that seriously challenges his view of society. A liberal Democrat can do the same with MSNBC, CNN, NPR, Air America, the New York Times, and the Daily Kos. This pattern isn't new. America has always had lots of opinionated journalism. What's new is that we no longer have a broadly shared moral consensus to ground our politics in a common purpose.

Something journalists often do badly is *listen*. That seems strange, and it is strange, because listening is an obligation of their profession. But deadlines and the need for brevity can easily lead reporters to take intellectual shortcuts. And on issues or beliefs that the media don't understand – or don't like – this can create real problems. Nowhere is this more obvious than in the press's treatment of religion.

That brings us to my key point about the press. Given the huge role Christian faith has always played, and still plays, in American life, any conversation about important public issues in our country that attempts to exclude religion will be incomplete. Yet it seems that, when it comes to religion, journalists and the people they cover are very different creatures. A 2005 study by the Annenberg

Public Policy Center showed that 40 percent of Americans attend church services once a week or more -- but only 17 percent of press professionals do.

The idea that this deep difference in religious practice doesn't flavor our press coverage would be too strange to take seriously. In a sense, we are what we believe. Our convictions shape the way we deal with the world. And that includes media professionals. If employees of ABC gave 80 times more financial support to the Obama presidential campaign than they did to John McCain – which is exactly what happened in 2008 -- it's sensible for the rest of us to have some questions about the fairness of the network's political coverage. In like manner, reporters who see religion as a superstition, or a backward social force, or a personal idiosyncrasy, or a source of division and violence, will *never* get the story of religious faith right. They don't have the vocabulary or the experience.

The problem is often made worse by the editors who supervise the reporters in the field. No major news organization would send reporters to cover politics, the military, sports, the economy or world affairs who lacked a good knowledge of their subject. But as the author and veteran journalist Terry Mattingly has argued, that's exactly what happens, again and again, with news coverage of religion. Most editors and most reporters simply don't take the religion beat seriously.

During the 2000 presidential election, George W. Bush told a crowd in Arkansas, "Don't be takin' a speck out of your neighbor's eye, when you got a log in your own." A story in The New York Times reported his words as an "interesting variation on the saying about the pot and the kettle". Apparently, nobody on The Times staff was acquainted with a Scripture passage that nearly every Sunday school student in America learns by the age of 10.

Here's my point. The news media, despite their claims of impartiality, and despite the good work they often do accomplish, are just as prone to prejudice, ignorance, bad craftsmanship and tribalism as any other profession. But *unlike* other professions, the press has constitutional protections. It also has real power in shaping how we think, what we think about and what we like, dislike and ignore. America's media, including its news media, are the greatest catechetical syndicate in history. And if that kind of power doesn't make us uneasy, it should at least make us alert.

We have a habit in this country of calling our news media "the *fourth* estate." But very few of the people I ask know why. It's worth explaining as I close these brief comments, and we move to some questions.

Before the 1789 revolution in France, that country had a parliament called the Estates General. The Estates General had three houses representing the three main pillars or "estates" of French society: the clergy, the nobles and the common people. But there was also another, very powerful player in the revolutionary events of that time, and a British statesman coined the phrase "fourth estate" to acknowledge the huge influence of the press.

Over the past 200 years, the power of the press in democratic societies has grown dramatically. The influence of the press led the 19th century poet and playwright Oscar Wilde to write that :

"In old days men had the rack. Now they have the press. That is an improvement certainly. But still it is very bad, and wrong, and demoralizing. Somebody -- was it [Edmund] Burke? -- called journalism the fourth estate. That was true at the time, no doubt. But at the present moment it is the *only* estate. It has eaten up the other three . . . We are dominated by journalism."

Of course, Oscar Wilde was not exactly a model of piety and Spartan virtue. But he had the gift of very keen perception, and we should think about what he said. When the press portrays itself as the "tribune of the people," ensuring the honesty of the other major institutions in our society through relentless critical scrutiny – then we need to ask the question, *who scrutinizes the press?* Who keeps our news media honest? Who holds them accountable for humiliating one political candidate while fawning over another? Nobody elected Brian Williams as the NBC news anchor. And readers can't impeach the editor of *The New York Times* – though some people I know would find that a happy thought.

What we *can* do is refuse to be stupid. We can decline to be sandbagged by our news establishment into thinking that marriage for homosexual partners is inevitable or an obligation of social justice; or that Islam and Christianity lead to pretty much the same conclusions about freedom, society and the nature of the human person; or that the abortion issue is somehow "settled" when thousands of unborn children continue to be legally killed everyday.

Scripture tells us that the Christian citizen must “render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar’s, and to God, the things that are God’s.” The press can’t help us with that task, because it doesn’t know, and often doesn’t *want* to know, the difference.

What we owe Caesar above all is honest, vigorous, public moral witness on abortion and every other vital social issue, whether Caesar likes it or not. Our moral witness needs to be formed not by the nightly news, but by learning and living an *authentic* Catholic faith. And when it is, we’ll be the kind of citizens who can appreciate the genuine service our news media provide to society. We’ll also be the kind of citizens who demand that our news media act with the sobriety, integrity, fairness and honesty their vocation requires.