



1-1-2012

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Recommended Citation

Russell Shaw, *The News Media and the Catholic Church*, 19 NOTRE DAME J.L. ETHICS & PUB. POL'Y 455 (2005).

Available at: <http://scholarship.law.nd.edu/ndjlepp/vol19/iss2/4>

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THE NEWS MEDIA AND THE CATHOLIC CHURCH

RUSSELL SHAW*

One day in the fall of 2003, I got a call from a reporter with a Boston news organization—not the *Boston Globe*.

He said Archbishop Sean O'Malley, the new Archbishop of Boston, had been speaking out in defense of traditional marriage and unborn human life and not everyone was well pleased. Some felt he should stick to the issue of sex abuse and not get distracted by anything else. Now, what did I think about that?

What I thought, I said, was that the Archbishop of Boston was doing just what anyone might have expected. The Catholic Church has a comprehensive commitment to human life and human rights, and this is a commitment he obviously shares. No one should be surprised or dismayed.

"I suppose you're right," the reporter replied. "People have said from the start that O'Malley buys the Church's party line."

I blew up.

To call the Church's commitment to human rights a party line was intolerable, I told him. For years, critics had accused pro-life Catholics of being single-issue people on the subject of abortion. Now, apparently, we were to be blamed for *not* being fixated on the single issue of sex abuse. Too much!

The journalist was nonplussed. "I was the one who said that about the 'party line,' not my sources," he volunteered. Then, after a pause: "I'm sorry."

The cynicism of journalists is legendary. Often it is a professional pose adopted by people who may have seen one revival too many of *The Front Page*. In the case of the Catholic Church, however, something deeper is at work—the cynicism expresses a view of the Church that, to say the least, is not friendly.

In a "pastoral plan" for communications adopted in 1997, the Catholic bishops of the United States provided a blunt state-

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ment of the interlocking problems faced by the Church in the media world.

Church representatives . . . do not have control over how the secular media portray the Church. Of great interest to many in the media, the Church is, for others, only one voice among many. Some, who are actively hostile, make Church teaching an object of attack or ridicule. Still others see the Church merely as a stereotype of the large institution, to be treated with the skepticism that all such institutions seem to receive in our society. Even Catholic media can project conflicting ideologies which sometimes leave the Church's teaching barely discernible, let alone communicable. Other limitations include the inherent difficulty of adequately conveying complex church teaching and policy in a culture that has become accustomed to the sound bite. An equally complex church structure of overlapping national and local responsibilities can result in a lack of coordination of communication efforts. Finally, financial limitations make it difficult to compete in the expensive world of American media.¹

This statement was promulgated almost five years before the sex abuse scandal in all its rancid fullness broke upon the Church and the nation. Even so, the analysis holds up pretty well.

Let that serve as a kind of prologue to the story that follows.

I.

Back in the early 1990's, I found myself at the campus-like headquarters of the Educational Testing Service ("ETS") in Princeton, New Jersey, where I had been invited to take part in a day-long discussion of religion and the media. The journalists included present and past staffers from the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, and other major news organizations. Also part of the mix were people from ETS and other think tanks and two representatives of the Catholic press.

As the hours passed, I found the conversation increasingly annoying. The church people were deferential, while the journalists insisted that media wanted nothing so much as to help religion. This had little to do with religion-media relations as I had experienced them.

In mid-afternoon, I took the floor and said my piece.

1. UNITED STATES CATHOLIC CONFERENCE, PASTORAL PLAN FOR CHURCH COMMUNICATION 5 (1997).

“From a historical perspective, anti-Catholicism has been a problem in the United States for a long time,” I began. I was aware I’d gotten my audience’s attention. “There is even a history of anti-Catholicism in American journalism. Still, I don’t think that old-fashioned anti-Catholicism is the problem today that it once was—I mean the kind of anti-Catholicism that is hostile in principle to all things Catholic. That still exists, but it isn’t socially acceptable.”

“The more serious problem now is a new kind of anti-Catholicism. Perhaps ‘anti-Catholicism’ isn’t even the right word, and I am careful not to speak casually about anti-Catholicism without qualifiers these days. But whatever it should be called, this new thing is very visible in the media.”

“It amounts to taking sides in the internal quarrels among Catholics. And naturally, the media tend to favor the liberal side. By way of illustration, consider the op-ed page of the *New York Times* and the Anna Quindlen column.”

At the time, Anna Quindlen was a widely-read *Times* columnist—a Catholic, a feminist, and a supporter of legalized abortion. Not infrequently, she used her column to say her piece on all three subjects—Catholicism, feminism, and abortion—while declaring her disgust with Pope John Paul II and Cardinal John O’Connor of New York.

“Ms. Quindlen is a very talented journalist,” I continued. “The *Times* is lucky to have her and is entitled to publish her. I don’t question that at all.”

“But, just to illustrate the problem I speak of, let me ask this: Would the *New York Times* regularly give Cardinal O’Connor the same space to air his views on Catholic doctrine on sex and abortion that it regularly gives to Anna Quindlen? Or, if that is unrealistic—and I’m sure it is—would the *Times* give the same opportunity to someone else who thinks pretty much as the Cardinal and Pope John Paul do? I think the answer is pretty obvious—and that’s the problem in a nutshell.”

My remarks were not well received.

A former education writer for the *New York Times*, now at ETS, asked huffily if I thought the *Times* should not carry the Quindlen column. Since I had specifically said the paper was entitled to do that, the question did not strike me as helpful. That’s not the point, I said. Well then, he demanded, what *did* I think the paper ought to do? Not for me to say, I replied. I’m trying to describe a problem, not tell the editors of the *New York Times* how to edit their paper.

But it was left to another former *Times* writer to make the most interesting rejoinder. She was a woman who recently had left the paper to do freelance writing. Earlier, she had told us she was raised a Catholic but had quit the Church because it oppressed women.

Anna Quindlen gets a lot of hate mail, she began. "There are crazies everywhere," I pointed out. I might have added that I get hate mail, too—it is an occupational hazard for anyone who puts ideas in print. But the heart of her message was a blunt defense of just the kind of ideological tilt I had spoken about. She put it like this: "Our secular society has certain needs and imperatives of its own. And it will satisfy those needs, and it will act on those imperatives, no matter who objects. And if you and people like you don't like it—that's your problem!"

Bravo! I couldn't have said it better. Our elite media are an integral part of the secular culture. The special role of journalists is to be cultural enforcers, rewarding those who conform and punishing those who do not. And this culture's message to Catholics who presume to disagree with it—a message communicated by the elite media—is: conform or else.

II.

The two most extensive studies of American media and the Catholic Church both are the work of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington. The first was commissioned by the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Knights of Columbus, and it was published in 1991.²

Four elite news organizations were examined: the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, and the CBS Television Evening News. These were, it is generally agreed, preeminent in their respective genres during the period under consideration.³ The study, using a social science technique called content analysis, covered news stories and editorial items, including unsigned editorials, signed columns, and op-ed articles, but not letters to the editor and editorial cartoons.⁴ Three five-year time blocs were included: 1964–68, 1974–78, and 1984–88.

The study did *not* support the notion that overt anti-Catholicism was rampant at these news organizations between 1964 and

2. S. ROBERT LICHTER ET AL., *MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH* (1991); *see also ANTI-CATHOLICISM IN THE MEDIA* (Patrick Riley & Russell Shaw eds., 1993).

3. LICHTER ET AL., *supra* note 2, at 10–11.

4. *Id.* at 11–13.

1988. Nor did it support the idea that there were no problems. The executive summary gives this overview:

On most controversies involving Church teachings, the Church came out on the losing side of the issue debate reported in the media. Although the opinion breakdown varied from one issue to another, sources supporting the Church were in the minority in the broad range of debates involving sexual morality and Church authority that dominated the coverage. These included heated controversies over birth control, clerical celibacy, the role of women and minorities in the Church, and its response to internal dissent and issues involving freedom of expression.

The major exception to this pattern involved ecumenical efforts, which the media treated as a kind of "motherhood and apple pie" issue, supported by all people of good will. Even on this dimension, however, opinion was split over whether the Church was helping or hindering efforts to promote inter-religious unity. Similarly, opinion was about evenly divided on the Church's involvement in political affairs. But most of the praise was for Church pronouncements condemning war. On domestic disputes over church-state relations, most sources opposed the Church's positions or activities.

Controversial issues were frequently presented as conflicts between the Church hierarchy, on the one side, and lower-level clergy, lay Catholics, and non-Catholics on the other. Journalists frequently approached this subject matter from a secular perspective, structuring their coverage of theological issues along the familiar lines of political reportage.

The result was a long-running media drama that pitted a hidebound institutional hierarchy against reformers from within and without. This portrayal was reinforced by the language used to describe the Church in media accounts. The descriptive terms most frequently applied to the Church emphasized its conservative theology, authoritarian forms of control, and anachronistic approach to contemporary society.⁵

III.

Ultimately, journalists are less fact-collectors than story-tellers. And the stories they tell about the Catholic Church rely on

5. *Id.* at 5-6.

politics as much as religion for their dramatic appeal. Increasingly, the story line revolves around a beleaguered authority struggling to enforce its traditions and decrees on a reluctant constituency.⁶

Wishing to know what had happened in the decade after the first study, the Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Our Sunday Visitor Institute asked the Center for Media and Public Affairs to do a new study of leading print and broadcast outlets in the 1990's. ABC and NBC evening news broadcasts were added, as were *USA Today*, *U.S. News & World Report*, and *Newsweek*. The study covered news items appearing from 1994 through 1998.⁷

The study found that two major Catholic stories dominated coverage of the Catholic Church in national news media during the 1990's. These were clergy sex abuse and controversy over women's issues. And indeed, by any definition of news, these really were important stories: the media did not invent them. But there is more to be said than that. The executive summary put it this way:

As it has over the past four decades, the coverage again emphasized the need for the Church to adapt to the more egalitarian and democratic norms and procedures that characterize the secular institutions of American society. . . . As we found in our earlier study, this was not a matter of overtly opinionated or muckraking coverage. It would be more accurate to see it as the reflection of the prism through which one institution—the media—views another with very different norms and traditions.⁸

IV.

The media coverage of the clergy sex abuse scandal has been one of those areas in which both religious leaders and the media have been at fault. To be sure, the media did the Church a great favor in bringing the ugly truth to light. Yet the coverage and commentary were often misleading and unfair. How and why that is so takes some explaining.

Like most other people, I first became aware of the problem of clergy sex abuse in 1985, when a priest in Lafayette, Louisiana,

6. *Id.* at 5–8.

7. Linda S. Lichter et al., *Media Coverage of the Catholic Church 1963–1998*, in *ANTI-CATHOLICISM IN AMERICAN CULTURE* 159 (Robert P. Lockwood ed., 2000).

8. *Id.* at 220.

went on trial charged with sexual molestation.⁹ After that first case, more cases quickly came to light in other places. By 1990, there were over one thousand reported cases of clergy sex abuse in the United States, non-Catholic as well as Catholic.¹⁰ By 1994, some sixty priests had been jailed.¹¹

One of the first book-length studies appeared in 1996. *Pedophiles and Priests* was the work of Philip Jenkins, a professor of history and religious studies at Pennsylvania State University and a prolific writer on religious topics. Jenkins noted that coverage of the sex abuse scandal reflected “an immense shift in media standards toward religious matters” that occurred in the decades before the scandal itself came to light.¹² The sexual revolution of the 1960’s and the rise of aggressive secularism were central to this shift. For reasons having to do not just with media but the culture as a whole, “the taboos limiting attacks on the established churches were lifted”¹³

Once that happened, Jenkins wrote:

[T]he media found that reprisals were not as severe as they might once have been, and that exposes did not in themselves conspicuously offend public taste. In fact, they even appealed to constituencies who actively favored the exposure of abuses. As standards of religious reporting shifted, it became increasingly fashionable to explore the sexual dilemmas of the clergy and to portray the churches as rife with exploitative sexuality. . . . [T]he media became prepared to seek out clerical scandals with an aggressiveness that would have been unimaginable a few years earlier.¹⁴

Jenkins concluded that the vanished era of favorable media coverage had left Church officials “poorly prepared for the onslaught of denunciation over abuse, and [they] could mount little effective opposition” against “egregiously hostile” coverage that relied on “anticlerical stereotypes.”¹⁵

Jenkins returned to the subject in a 2003 book called *The New Anti-Catholicism*, which added some new dimensions to this unhappy tale. In particular, he argued that, starting in the 1960’s, the hostility to the Catholic Church of homosexual activ-

9. See *Painful Secrets: Priests Accused of Pederasty*, TIME, July 1, 1985, at 51.

10. See Laurie Goodstein & Alessandra Stanley, *As Scandal Keeps Growing, Church and Its Faithful Reel*, N.Y. TIMES, Mar. 17, 2002, at 1.

11. See Mark Clayton & Seth Stern, *Clergy, Abuse, and Jail Time*, CHRISTIAN SCIENCE MONITOR, Mar. 21, 2002, at 1.

12. PHILIP JENKINS, *PEDOPHILES AND PRIESTS* 58 (1996).

13. *Id.* at 64.

14. *Id.*

15. *Id.* at 72.

ists and pro-abortion feminists over gender-related political issues helped pave the way for coverage of the sex abuse story by journalists whose view of the Church had been shaped by these sources.

“[T]he disproportionate reaction to the clergy abuse issue, the suggestion of pervasive criminality, cannot be understood except as a reflection of accumulated political grievances over other issues, often involving sexuality and gender,” he wrote.¹⁶ And although the problem of sex abuse was by no means peculiar to the clergy of the Catholic Church, the media decided early in the game to treat it as if it were.

Hence, the media stereotype of the “pedophile priest,” despite the fact that many offenders were not priests and most priest-offenders were not pedophiles.¹⁷ Jenkins noted the strange phenomenon that many of the “most damaging” attacks on the Church throughout the scandal came from commentators who would, no doubt, describe themselves as faithful Catholics but whose rhetoric resorted to “an often ferocious range of anti-Church arguments”¹⁸

The best analysis and critique of media coverage of the abuse scandal to date is that of Peter Steinfelds in *A People Adrift*. Steinfelds is highly critical of both the media and the leadership of the Church for their handling of the scandal.

On the side of the media, he accuses journalists of distorting the facts by not making it clear that the cases of sex abuse they reported very often were not new cases but the same old cases repeated over and over again.¹⁹ Journalists also failed to acknowledge an apparently sharp decline in abuse by clergy starting after 1993, when the bishops collectively adopted a rational, uniform policy for the handling of the problem in dioceses.²⁰ Unfortunately, the policy was not mandatory, and although many bishops implemented it, some, as we now know, tragically did not.

16. PHILIP JENKINS, *THE NEW ANTI-CATHOLICISM* 134 (2003).

17. *Id.* at 145–46 (stating that many clergy of varying denominations were guilty of abuse and that the “typical” abuse case involved “a young person between fifteen and seventeen, more commonly a boy than a girl,” while pedophilia properly refers to “sex with prepubescent children, regardless of their gender”).

18. *Id.* at 156.

19. PETER STEINFELDS, *A PEOPLE ADRIFT* 44–45 (2003).

20. *See id.* at 48–49 (describing the bishops’ 1993 creation of the Ad Hoc Committee on Sexual Abuse to address the issue and the subsequent implementation of these recommendations in a “majority of dioceses”).

Perhaps, though, journalists cannot be blamed for this particular failure, since even after 1993 the bishops did so little to let anyone know what was going on. The bishops were still wedded to the idea that the less anyone knew about this scandal, the better it would be for the Church. But clearly it was not.

In fairness, Steinfels acknowledged the difficult problem the bishops faced in attempting to respect the sensitivities of abuse victims and the court-imposed requirements of sealed settlements. But there were other “opportunities for disclosure”²¹—about the extent of the problem and the way it was being handled—that the leadership routinely ignored. “Sharing information of this sort did not come naturally to bishops,”²² he wrote. “Most of this failure to disclose—indeed aggressively to inform and educate Catholics about—the sex abuse scandals revealed after 1985 almost certainly sprang from deeply ingrained habits of holding information within a very narrow circle of advisers and decision makers. In 2002, the Church would pay dearly for this failure.”²³

And so it did. Even after the story began cascading out day after day in the pages of the *Boston Globe* in January 2002, Church leaders at both the diocesan and national levels remained unable to mount a response for several months. Partly, this was a reflection of ecclesiology: since the problem was a diocesan problem—first in Boston and soon in other dioceses across the country—the national conference of bishops had no authority to get involved. One thing that would have helped would have been the availability of accurate, comprehensive statistics on abuse—how many abusers, how many victims, when did the incidents occur? However, this was precisely the sort of information the bishops’ conference had never been allowed to collect.

The media also did their part to make things worse for the Church. This included such repeated practices as the blurring of the time frame already noted and the constant use of misleading catch-phrases like “pedophile priests,” “cover-up,” and, of course, “zero toleration.” Steinfels also called attention to an important special aspect of the media problem:

[T]he near unanimity—and in many instances vehemence—of the commentary appearing in editorials and columns or heard on the air. Not that one expected editorial writers, commentators, or columnists to defend sex abuse! Yet one might have expected a few voices moderat-

21. *Id.* at 59.

22. *Id.*

23. *Id.*

ing the sweeping denunciations of bishops, pointing out some of the actions they had taken as well as some of the dilemmas they faced. Instead, columnists and commentators settled numerous scores with the Catholic Church, from the way they were treated in parochial school to the church's opposition to abortion and refusal to ordain women to its lobbying for poverty programs and against armaments. . . . The one-sidedness of the commentary indicated, on the one hand, just how antagonistic to Catholicism the media culture has become and, on the other hand, just how nervous Catholicism's remaining friends in that culture are about going out on a limb for the church's leaders.²⁴

V.

Six months after the early 1991 appearance of the Center for Media and Public Affairs' first study of media coverage of the Church, a daylong symposium devoted to discussing it took place at the National Press Club in Washington, D.C. The remarks by Richard Harwood were especially interesting.²⁵ Harwood was an experienced newsman who at that time was ombudsman of the *Washington Post*, and he later wrote a *Post* column dealing mainly with the news business.

Harwood agreed that, as he rather obliquely put it, the "secular character of our newspapers is not totally divorced from the interests or character of the people who produce them."²⁶ Of the finding that journalists with elite news organizations have "weak" religious attachments he stated, "That is true in my own case and is consistent with my impression of my colleagues. We were educated in secular institutions, are quite sensitive to changing fashions in secular intellectual thought and to the pseudo-secularism preached in many pulpits."²⁷

Still, he went on, analysis cannot stop with the media—it must extend to the Church. As far as the Catholic Church is concerned, the "great intersection"²⁸ of its doctrines and "the political affairs of this secular society"²⁹ has become newsworthy in our times. This "intrusion of religious bodies and individuals into

24. *Id.* at 64–65.

25. Richard Harwood, *The Secular Character of our Press*, in ANTI-CATHOLICISM IN THE MEDIA, *supra* note 2, at 156.

26. *Id.* at 159.

27. *Id.*

28. *Id.* at 160.

29. *Id.*

secular affairs”³⁰ has resulted in “demystification, a loss of deference, and an erosion of institutional standing.”³¹

Harwood then turned to the study’s finding that in news coverage of controversies about Church doctrine, sources critical of the teaching outnumbered sources supporting it. He said:

One reason for the disparity of the numbers is . . . that the position of the Church on many of these issues is a minority position among Americans in general, and quite possibly among American Catholics as well. . . . The teachings on contraception, in my view, really have no intellectual standing in our society outside the Church, and perhaps with a minority within the Church. Possibly that could be said of other issues. . . .

But as journalists were are under no obligation to give superior weight or credence to an institutional declaration of the Pope or the cardinals or whatever. . . .

The story of religion in America is starting to resemble other stories. It has come to resemble a great political story. It has begun to have high-profile scandals, and all the rest. It is becoming less of an institutional story which can be handled by covering established bodies and their actions. Religion . . . is becoming more diverse and privatized, and is finding its way into the news in new and different ways and places.

I think that is what we are seeing today in our newspapers and in the other media. There is no question whatever that these media are secular institutions. There is no question that secular thought is the preferred body of thought within the media. . . . [W]e should not be surprised at that, because these media mirror the concerns and attitudes of the popular culture. I think that is not going to change; and if Bob Lichter comes back a few years from now and does a similar study, he is going to get the same results.³²

It is not uncommon for Church people and journalists to utter happy-talk absurdities when speaking of relations between religion and the media. That day at the National Press Club, Richard Harwood spoke hard truth. Whether one likes what he said or not, his comments deserve close attention and careful reflection by anyone seriously concerned to understand this increasingly contentious and conflicted relationship. The ironic,

30. *Id.*

31. *Id.*

32. *Id.* at 162–63.

faintly contemptuous indifference of a Harwood and the menacing hostility of the former *New York Times* writer at the Educational Testing Service conference are very different in tone, but neither offers much consolation to the Catholic Church. Between them, they frame the parameters of the secular news media environment in which the Church in the United States must operate today. The Church is guilty of many mistakes and abuses in its approach to media; it should be far more forthcoming in facing up to and correcting them. But in this troubled relationship, journalists are guilty of gross abuses of their own, and up to now, their willingness to recognize these faults has been virtually nil.