



Catholic Press Association Convention, Toronto, 2008: Shadow Keynote Address

by Neal J. Conway

Neither this web page nor nealjconway.com, nor anybody or anything connected with, or to, Neal J. Conway have any affiliation with the Catholic Press Association or indeed with any member of the Catholic Press Association.

12/27/2007: Once upon a Catholic Press Association convention, I listened as a Catholic-paper publisher argued that advertisers should place ads in Catholic papers because such papers have “integrity.”

This was pretty naive because advertisers are not interested in the “integrity” of publications but in their circulation numbers and in the demographics of their readership. If they find neither to their satisfaction, they will not spend their money on ad space, even if a publication has “integrity.”

But do Catholic publications really have “integrity?” What is meant by “integrity” anyway?

Several years ago there was a slogan going around: “Without us [the Catholic Press] you haven’t got a prayer,” implying that Catholic media are much more reliable than non-Catholic media when it comes to reporting on Catholic matters and truth in general. Catholic papers are more reliable because they print the truth which includes good, positive news. This, I think, is what the publisher had in mind when he used the word “integrity.”

Let’s take a look at printing “the truth.” It’s easier said than done. For one thing there is limited space in the paper and a lot of truths to choose from. It is a truth that the senior girls at Holy Mother of God High School donated their prom dresses to less fortunate inner-city girls. It is a truth that the Rev. Mr. John McGoo celebrated his 25th anniversary as a deacon and it is a truth that the pope called war deplorable.

It is also a truth that the diocesan director of finance has embezzled hundreds of thousands of dollars over the years. It is also a truth that a certain youth minister has been taking young boys to the botanical gardens to see the ivy. It is also a truth that a local parish priest has been stalking Conan O’Brien.

In half of these examples, “the truth” is not pretty, not

“positive.” But Catholics are better served when they read the unpleasant truth that their donations have gone for a diocesan official’s beach house than when they read the positive truth that Regina Rich gave away her prom dress.

But which of these six examples of truth are least likely to be reported in a Catholic diocesan paper?

Correct. Tell me if I’m wrong, but I cannot think of any instance in which a diocesan Catholic paper broke bad news about the diocese or the church. Yes, diocesan papers have addressed scandals such as homosexual priests preying on teenage boys, but they only addressed them after the secular media broke the news about them.

Now, no one expects the poor, underpaid editor of a diocesan paper and his staff to report that their employer, the bishop takes seminarians to his vacation home where they discover that there is only one bed. No one expects diocesan-paper people to emphasize that Mr. Generous Catholic Business Leader pushing the building of a new Catholic school happens to be in real estate or construction. No one expects them to dig and uncover that Rich Catholic Family Big Advertisers who donate four figures to the new school are making five figures selling school uniforms or book-bags etc. bearing the school logo.

But neither should poor diocesan paper editors etc. claim that their publications have more “integrity,” no bias etc. when it comes to printing “truth.” Unless a bishop-controlled paper is controlled by a bishop who is dedicated to being honest and open, printing truths most important to his flock, even if it causes setbacks and offense, especially to big donors and advertisers, bishop-controlled papers can’t claim to be anything more than propaganda sheets. And their staff members can’t claim to be anything more than paid high-school journalists.

The same is true of the bishop-controlled Catholic News Service that supplies local papers with filler--er, excuse me, national and international news.

Before turning to the official Catholic news agency let me first interject that I do not think bias is so much a problem in journalism as is laziness and inability to recognize a

story of merit. The same is true of the Catholic press, too. A Catholic who writes a book, paints icons, or sails thousands of miles under the Arctic ice is more worthy of column inches than a Catholic who graduates from State University with honors or a Catholic who gets some award from the silly old biddies at the Daughters of The American Revolution. Or worse yet, a Catholic who gets born or married. Yet many a Catholic editor does not understand this.

Most of the time, good news is indeed no news. Still, there should be a place in Catholic papers for brides, babies and graduates. They are the reason people still bother to pick up Catholic papers at all, but such items should be far, far from the front page.

Speaking of laziness, as well as not printing unpleasant truths, on to the Catholic News Service. In the past few years, the CNS has really dropped the ball on a couple of important stories.

One was about on-line Catholic dating services. The CNS report on them was an “Isn’t this great?!” article that looked to be no more than a retyping of a press release issued by the operator of one of these rip-offs.

It appears that no effort was made to discover if on-line dating services were really all that great.

Some digging would have uncovered a lot of disappointment with the “Catholic” services as there is a lot of disappointment with the secular versions. In fact, few businesses other than palm reading would last in the face of such high numbers of customer dissatisfaction. My web site, nealjconway.com, was the only info source to publish anything critical of Catholic on-line dating scams. It included a report of the owner of one admitting in an obscure Catholic paper that his service did not work for most subscribers.

The second story underreported, in effect, ignored, by the bishops’ Catholic press is that of Tom Monaghan and his Ave Maria University and Ave Maria School of Law. It’s a huge story, not just a story but a soap opera, an epic.

Again what the CNS has reported was merely happy news about Ave Maria being a new Catholic university etc. Part of the story, the ignored part, is that a lot of students, parents, employees, ex-employees, are very unhappy with Mr. Monaghan and his Ave Maria ventures. At least four fired staff and faculty have filed suit against Monaghan. The university and law school are far from being solidly accredited. There are reports that Monaghan has set up his schools in the center of a closed financial universe so that

money that he has “donated” returns to him, and in amounts greater than what he gave.

Thank God for Catholic publications that are independent of the hierarchy and that employ real journalists. Otherwise prospective students or job-seekers looking at Ave Maria would know nothing of its shaky accreditation or of the rotten treatment of students and employees.

The publications performing real service to Catholics include *The Wanderer*, *The New Oxford Review*, which lost advertising because of its reporting about Ave Maria, and a web site, avewatch.org, the operator of which digs up everything that can be dug about Monaghan, his network of influential cronies and his fiascoes.

Yes, the real Catholic journalists are not to be found under the thumbs of bishops. Two more examples include John L. Allen Jr. and Joe Feuerherd of *The National Catholic Reporter*. The NCR is on the whole, a rag of dissent, but Allen’s professionalism resulted in the best book about Opus Dei to date. Feuerherd exposed Deal Hudson’s sordid past when others, including EWTN, furthered Hudson’s celebrity, apparently unconcerned about his three marriages. Whatever motivated NCR in bringing down Deal, it had to be done.

Yet I doubt that any of the aforementioned servants of God will, for their aforementioned work, receive any awards poured out in great abundance at the Catholic Press Association convention banquet. Indeed, the *New Oxford Review* quit the CPA, noting that everybody who belongs to it gets awards anyway. That seems to be true. I am certain that in Toronto this spring, my local diocesan paper, which runs pictures of Catholic school kids on its front page nearly every issue, will receive several.

St. Francis De Sales intercede for us.

St. John Paul the Great intercede for all those working to build up the Catholic Church.

Mary, Mother of God, intercede for us.

Neal J. Conway writes from Washington, DC. He is a former member of the Catholic Press Association. For several years he was on the editorial staff of Share The Word magazine and Let’s Talk, a newsletter for prisoners. Both publications won CPA awards. He is also the author of Tales From Old Bethesda, an obscure but landmark work in Catholic fiction. He currently works as an editor in the secular news media. His web site is nealjconway.com.

Copyright 2008 by Neal J. Conway