Journalism and Polarities in the Church

John L. Allen Jr.

From his journalistic perspective, Allen explores the relationship between modern journalism in its secular and Catholic forms in light of Christ's challenge that “they all may be one.”

For anyone with a sense of history, the situation facing Roman Catholicism in the United States with respect to its internal divisions cannot help but seem ironic. The American Catholic community spent the first half of the twentieth century clawing its way out of a ghetto imposed upon it by a hostile Protestant majority, thus emerging into the American mainstream. American Catholics then spent the second half of the century constructing ideological ghettos of their own choosing, insulating themselves not so much from Protestants as from one another.

As a result, American Catholics today by and large move in self-contained circles: “social justice Catholics,” “charismatic Catholics,” “neoconservative Catholics,” “Vatican II Catholics,” “traditional Catholics,” to name only a few of the most common tribes. Though division in American Catholicism is usually characterized by the term “polarization,” this is actually misleading if taken to suggest that the only fault line of consequence runs between right and left. “Fragmentation” is a better word for the sociological reality. In a sense, there is no such thing as “a” Catholic Church in the United States; there are multiple “Catholicisms,” and quite often they’re not on speaking terms.

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In itself, such diversity is both enriching and inevitable. With some 67 million Catholics in the United States, enjoying high levels of education, an American cultural tradition of robust self-expression, and resources that are the envy of the rest of the world, the American church is destined to be rambunctious.

Today’s problem is not so much that we have divisions, a reality of Christian life that goes back to the Acts of the Apostles. The problem is that we lack both a common language to discuss those divisions, as well as the desire to deal with them charitably. Today’s most engaged American Catholics spend most of their time moving in closed circuits; reading the approved newspapers and magazines of those who think like them, attending approved conferences and workshops, taking cues from the approved heroes. On the rare occasion when they encounter a Catholic from another point of view, it is not merely that they disagree on issues, but they have widely different senses of what the important issues actually are. They have gone so far down separate paths as to lack common points of reference, which would render dialogue problematic even if both parties were interested in talking to each other.

In practice, however, the parties are rarely all that interested. More often, they perceive the other through a “hermeneutics of suspicion,” seeing that person as a threat, perhaps wondering if he or she is really “Catholic” at all. The result is that moving across the party lines in American Catholicism can be a rather depressing exercise.

Granted that this is an over-generalization, it nevertheless captures something real that most Catholics can recognize from their own experience. What responsibility does journalism bear for all this? One could get caught up here in a perennial journalism school chicken-and-egg debate: Does journalism create a social situation or merely reflect it? In the end, the right answer is probably “both.” Press coverage of the church is both a cause and a reflection of the fragmentation of American Catholicism.

Though I am by no means a theologian, I nevertheless believe I can permit myself the observation that a “hermeneutics of suspicion” is difficult to reconcile with the “ecclesiology of communion” that is supposed to characterize the inner life of the church. The final earthly prayer of Christ was that the church may be one, and hence it ought to be a matter of urgent concern to seek a different way of managing our relationships.

In this essay, I hope to explore the relationship between modern journalism, in both its secular and Catholic forms, and that challenge.
Conflict is the stuff of drama. Without conflict, there is no tension, there is no resolution, there is no change. Hence stories of disagreement, of competing visions, and of high-stakes showdowns will always attract press interest in a way that stories of harmony and consensus never will.

This observation does not imply that journalists invent conflict. American Catholics really are divided over many things—the war in Iraq, the death penalty, the sexual abuse scandal, to name a few leading instances. Further, the secular press does the American Catholic community a service by giving voice to people who speak for various constituencies that otherwise would feel unrepresented: Father Joseph Fessio for the church’s conservative wing, Father Richard McBrien for the liberals, Sister Joan Chittister for Catholic feminists, and so on. In that sense, the secular media sometimes does a better job of presenting the true conversation within the church in the United States, in all its polyphony, than do official spokespersons or media outlets.

Yet by its near-exclusive focus on a narrow canon of contested issues, modern journalism induces Catholics to see their disagreements as the most fundamental aspect of their religious identity. Media coverage leads Catholics to spend a disproportionate amount of time thinking about a limited number of controversies, thus implicitly training them to conceive of the church as a political society with competing camps and interest groups. Catholics who relish screaming at each other over the issue of gay priests will have found plenty of fodder in the papers in recent months, for example, but those seeking creative ways to balance identity with openness have been left largely on their own. That is not the only way the media makes promoting a spirituality of communion difficult.

The “he said/she said” approach of many news stories, which seeks balance by quoting extremists on opposite sides of a question, tends to make celebrities out of ideologues while more centrist voices struggle to be heard. This natural tendency has been exacerbated since the advent of cable and the Internet by the sheer proliferation of news outlets. In a crowded marketplace, the best way to build a devoted following is often by catering to people’s prejudices. No longer does the entire nation gather to hear Walter Cronkite explain “that’s the way it was.” Instead,
Many secular news outlets do not take religion seriously as a news beat, which sometimes leads to misunderstanding. In fairness, many American papers have first-class religion writers, but they are often a lone force trying to cover a bewilderingly complex array of established faiths, new movements, and public policy issues. Only within the last twelve months has CNN hired a single “Faith and Values” correspondent to cover the entire galaxy of religious phenomena, foreign and domestic. Inevitably, this means that the coverage of the church is episodic, random, and often superficial—not through any fault of the individual journalist, but rather the short attention spans in their organizations and limited resources.

To some extent this situation reflects commercial assumptions about the interests of readers and viewers; to some extent, too, it reflects the biases of secular elites who call the shots in newsrooms, who often see religion as quaint at best, dangerous at worst. (Ironically, it is the latter who generally give religion more air time.)

In any event, gross errors of fact, mischaracterizations, and misleading generalizations which would never see the light of day in stories on politics or business, often sail through to the front page when it comes to religion. The result is that Catholics are not just divided over real issues, but we also spend a striking amount of time arguing over matters that turn out to be based on misinterpretations.

This is an even more serious danger with respect to the Catholic Church, since coverage of Catholic events sometimes puts American reporters in the position of trying to decipher statements and policies that emerge from an entirely different cultural matrix, that is, the Augustinian/Thomistic worldview of the Vatican, filtered through the sociology of the Southern Mediterranean.

One classic example would be differing Anglo-Saxon and Mediterranean views of law, which came into clear evidence most recently in reactions to the new Vatican document on gay priests. It is an eternal struggle to get American reporters to understand that when the Vatican says things such as “no gay priests,” it does not really mean “no gay priests.” It means “fewer gay priests, but we all know this is an ideal, and reasonable people will make judgments in individual cases.” In
Mediterranean cultures, law is a spiritual aspiration, not a lowest common denominator of civic behavior that everyone is expected to follow.

Even when the facts of a misleading story are later established, earlier perceptions endure. This cycle holds the pursuit of “communion” hostage to the latest media eruption, which often enough turns out to have been artificial or unnecessary.

For example, in July 2003, during the peak period of the sexual abuse crisis in the United States, CBS Evening News opened its nightly news broadcast by asserting, “Now it turns out the orders for this cover-up were written in Rome at the highest levels of the Vatican.” The “smoking gun” in the CBS report, based on an earlier story in the *Worcester Telegram and Gazette*, was a 1962 Vatican document titled *Crimen Sollicitationis*, which decreed that canonical investigations of some sorts of sexual abuse, especially abuse of the confessional to obtain sexual favors, were to be covered by perpetual secrecy. In fact, the CBS report was based on a basic misunderstanding of the difference between canon law and civil law. *Crimen Sollicitationis* imposes secrecy exclusively on canonical procedures; it says absolutely nothing about the civil reporting of crimes. While there was certainly a mentality in the church that discouraged airing its dirty laundry, sensationalistic stories about *Crimen Sollicitationis* amounted to a red herring that fueled conspiracy theories about how the “cover-up” was engineered in the Vatican, when in reality the problem is a much more diffuse and widespread phenomenon of Catholic culture. Understanding that point required a grasp of canon law and Catholic life that few reporters possess, and certainly cannot be expected to acquire under the pressure of near-instantaneous deadlines.

Finally, the models of public conversation offered by the secular media are often unhelpful to a spirit of mutual understanding. *Crossfire*, to take just one example, does not exactly loom as a promising antidote to the “hermeneutics of suspicion.” These dynamics mean that the secular press often contributes to acrimony within the church by accenting lines of division, and even generating new sources of heartache.

All this is intended as analysis, not polemic. Journalism in the West, with a few notable exceptions, is a for-profit enterprise rather than a public trust. It has its own logic, and it is not reasonable to assume that logic should always coincide with the best interests of the Catholic Church. It is up to Catholics to know how

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to react to the media, not for the media to “pull its punches” out of sensitivity to the church or anyone else. But it is important for Catholics to acknowledge that the media environment can condition us to accept rancor as a natural state of affairs, and to lionize those who stoke it. It is one of the ways in which, rather than evangelizing the secular world, quite often Catholics have unconsciously been evangelized by it.

**Fragmentation and Catholic Journalism**

It is not immediately obvious that one can hold the Catholic press to a higher standard than its secular counterparts in terms of translating an “ecclesiology of communion” into practice.

After all, are not diocesan newspapers and other “official” media outlets ultimately designed to promote the teaching of the church, as well as the pastoral agenda of the particular diocese or other church unit which sponsors them? Is it truly reasonable to expect those news outlets to be “open,” for example, to criticism of the bishop, or the diocese? In other words, would not an impartial position vis-à-vis intra-Catholic debates conflict with the purposes for which these outlets were created—not to mention funded, often at considerable expense?

For those Catholic news agencies not sponsored by the institutional church—including large national outlets such as *First Things*, *Commonweal*, EWTN, or the *National Catholic Reporter*—do they not face the same need to attract and maintain an audience as secular news outlets? Even if many are technically non-profit organizations, they too have to pay salaries, cover distribution costs, and meet the light bill. Each has a core constituency with a fairly clear ideological orientation, and is it really fair to expect them on a routine basis to challenge that constituency? Can we reasonably ask them to bite the hand that feeds them? After all, while the church has always celebrated martyrdom, it has never taught that it is obligatory. There are still other reasons why “communion journalism” is hard to come by in today’s Catholic press.

Quite often, even those Catholic outlets that most self-consciously pride themselves on a tenacious defense of the faith nevertheless take their cues from secular journalism, at least in terms of tradecraft. They often want to be just as hard-hitting, just as clever, and just as edgy as the best secular news outlets, on the theory that they want to present the message of the gospel in the most effective fashion possible, using all the most sophisticated tools and strategies of twenty-first century communications. Hence you will find editorials in Catholic publications with the same snide put-downs of opposing views one finds in the secular press, albeit in defense of laudable values. You can find Catholic talk shows that engage in the same demagoguery as the worst of AM radio, again with the best of intentions. Catholic journalists, just like their secular counterparts, often applaud
one another for wielding a rapier pen, and for “keeping the pot boiling” on current controversies.

Further, journalists drawn to covering the Catholic Church often have one of two motivations. Some are deeply convinced of the truth of the Catholic message, and see the media as their way of serving the church. Often this includes a very self-conscious determination to defend the church from her enemies. On the other hand, another kind of journalist is drawn to the Catholic “beat” because he or she has felt hurt or betrayed by the church. This kind of Catholic believes the church needs to undergo significant reform, usually in a progressive direction—greater democracy, women’s rights, tolerance of theological dissent, and so on.

Nothing, it should be said, is wrong per se with either of these instincts. In a secularized world, the church needs capable apologists. The church is also semper reformanda, continually in need of reform, and it depends upon prophets who push it to realize the best version of itself. (This, of course, is not to suggest that every apologia currently in circulation is helpful, or that every version of “reform” has merit.)

The point, however, is that while these instincts have value for the church, they do not always make for good journalism. The news business needs editorialists and pundits, but the heart of the trade is reporting—providing a serious, reasonably objective presentation of a set of facts, so that people may then have a rational debate about what the story means and what to do about the issues it raises. When journalists skip past fact-collection and objective analysis, and move directly into drawing conclusions, the risk is that they end up skewing the public debate.

Beyond these considerations, there looms one other enormously important point that complicates the search for communion. Probably the most significant mega-trend coursing through Roman Catholicism at the moment is the push for a clear sense of Catholic identity. Many bishops and other leaders coming on the scene today believe that the optimistic openness of the immediate post–Vatican II years too often degenerated into what Jacques Maritain called “kneeling before the world,” leading to a gradual assimilation to worldly values such as relativism.

As Cardinal Francis George of Chicago put it at an early January conference in Rome, “The Church seems to have incorporated into herself all the divisions of the world, which makes her a less effective missionary, and betrays the intentions
of the Second Vatican Council.” For these leaders, and a generation of young priests, writers, and activists who share their instincts, the primary task of the moment is to emphasize Catholic uniqueness in liturgy, in language, and in doctrine.

This spirit is astir in many quarters of the Catholic press. While there is no necessary contradiction between having a clear identity and being in unity with others—one could argue, in fact, that John Paul II’s pontificate amounted to a twenty-six-year lesson in how to combine them effectively—still, at the psychological level, some Catholics worry that talk of “communion” and “dialogue” amounts to an invitation to go fuzzy on identity.

There are, of course, counter-instances. In the world of on-line journalism, one can point to such initiatives as “Busted Halo” and “Godspy,” both pitched to some extent at younger Catholics and both focused on the intersection between gospel and culture. While “Busted Halo” may have a somewhat progressive flavor, and “Godspy” a vaguely conservative one, both are determined to think past the old polarities.

In broad terms, however, it is difficult to see the Catholic press in its present configuration acting as the catalyst for a movement towards a deeper sense of intra-Catholic communion. It is more plausible to think of the press reacting to that movement once it takes shape.

**Toward a “Spirituality of Communion”**

No program or strategy for promoting communion, including editorial decisions made within news organizations, will ultimately make much difference if people have no interest in unity. What is urgently needed today is *metanoia*—a change of heart that awakens us to the spiritual corrosion of ideological and tribal prejudice. Without it, everything else is akin to planting flowers at a toxic waste site—nice gesture, but ultimately futile.

The absence of a popular movement toward a “Spirituality of Communion” goes a long way, in my view, toward explaining the limited results of Cardinal Joseph Bernardin’s “Common Ground Project.”

John Paul II put it this way in his 2001 apostolic letter *Novo Millennio Ineunte*: “Let us have no illusions. Unless we follow this path, external structures of communion will serve little purpose. They would become mechanisms without a soul, ‘masks’ of communion rather than its means of expression and growth.”

Essential components of a twenty-first century “Spirituality of Communion” might include the following.

1. **Spiritual Grounding:** We need to storm heaven with prayer for ongoing personal conversion to the ideal of communion. For fifty years now, since the close of
the Second Vatican Council and the church’s commitment to the ecumenical movement, we have preached the need to overcome old prejudices with respect to other Christians. That effort, by and large, has been a tremendous success. Can we now make a similar effort with respect to prejudices among ourselves?

2. **Epistemological humility**: We live in a culture of instant opinion, in which we are all pressured to draw immediate conclusions about everything that happens. Yet complex problems rarely have simple solutions, and only God has the final word. That implies resisting snap judgment and treating other views with respect.

3. **Breaking out of one’s ghetto**: It is a good discipline to read diverse publications and cultivate friendships across the party lines, resisting the temptation to wall oneself off from diverse points of view. One practical idea is to invite people from different constituencies of the church into conversation, planning joint projects and sharing life with one another. This could be done at the level of parishes, university communities, dioceses, as well as on the national and international level.

4. **Learning to speak a common language**: We must make sure that our points of reference come from the liturgical, spiritual, philosophical, and theological heritage of the Catholic Church, not from secular democracy, corporate culture, and the like. Especially in a historical era in which the quest for Catholic identity is such a strong force in the church, no approach to communion that is not clearly grounded in the essentials of Catholic tradition has a future.

5. **Patience and hope**: In the long run, Catholicism always seeks the sane middle, but that “long run” can sometimes be measured in evolutionary time. We must have confidence in the church, trusting that ultimately its vicissitudes are in God’s hand, not ours. In a microwave society, can we be people of patience?

6. **A sense of global community**: If we are a global family of faith, that means not always having things our own way. Is a place at the table of this family more important to us than being right? Can we balance the prophetic instinct with the priority of communion? Given that two-thirds of the Catholics alive today live in the global South, and that by 2025 only one Catholic in five will be a non-Hispanic white, the “American” way of seeing issues in the church is likely to be of declining consequence. Can we accept that as part of the price of admission?

How to foster this kind of spirituality is among the great questions facing the American church, and one hopes that bishops, pastors, and lay Catholics alike will invest considerable time and treasure addressing it.

A final word on the role of theologians with regard to this “Spirituality of Communion.” In the United States, Catholic theologians by and large have the good
fortune of serving at Catholic universities with a strong commitment to academic freedom, or on non-Catholic campuses with the same commitment. The university remains virtually the only space in contemporary American society designed to foster conversation among a wide variety of points of view, which is at least somewhat insulated from commercial and ideological pressures to skew that conversation in particular directions. A sustained commitment among Catholic theologians to foster communion among the various Catholic “tribes” may therefore be among the last, best hopes of real change.

In all candor, such an effort is not yet visible. Too often the professional theological guild is more like a case study in, not a solution to, the partisan divisions in the church. But faith is precisely the “realization of what is hoped for, and the evidence of things not seen.”