Culture
News



Raymond Arroyo introduces Laura Ingraham at the 2018 Conservative Political Action Conference (CPAC) at the Gaylord National Resort & Convention Center at National Harbor Md. on Friday, February 23, 2018. Arroyo is a best selling author and news director and lead anchor of EWTN News, the news division of the Eternal Word Television Network. (AP Images/Jeff Malet)



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This series represents a continuation of NCR's look at the effect of money, largely making its way through the expanding and uniquely American non-profit system, on the Catholic narrative both inside the church and beyond. EWTN is one of the major vehicles for that narrative. NCR delves into the development of the network that now has a truly global reach and includes several print publishing arms as well as the TV enterprise. This is Part One. Part Two can be read here. Part Three can be read here . Part Four can be read here.

On Memorial Day, viewers who tuned into EWTN's News Nightly for "news from a Catholic perspective" were treated to two previously recorded one-on-one interviews by anchor Lauren Ashburn.

In the first, a 10-minute sit-down with Mike Pence during his March visit to Ave Maria University in Florida, the vice president bashed "media elites and Hollywood liberals," called Democrats "the party of abortion on demand, even the party of infanticide" and described President Donald Trump as "the most pro-life president in American history."

In the second interview, Ashburn served up softball questions for 11 minutes with former White House Press Secretary Sarah Sanders. The EWTN anchor gushed about the latest unemployment numbers and asked why the mainstream media hasn't given more coverage to this accomplishment, held up a devotional book she learned Sanders reads daily before asking about religious liberty, and ended with a query about her favorite ice cream. (It's mint chocolate chip.)

As part of a question that cited a poll showing white Catholics were holding a 44 percent favorable approval rating for Trump, Ashburn pointed out: "And I would just say that 44 percent number could be a lot higher if he came on to News Nightly."

"We'll work on that," Sanders responded with a laugh.

The segment was clear evidence of how a television outlet once devoted to expressions of Catholic piety and conservative catechesis and apologetics has grown into a truly influential media empire, well connected to Republican politicians and the Trump White House. EWTN, where the "Catholic perspective" is unabashedly partisan, has also become the media star in a web of connections including wealthy conservative Catholic donors and some of the most public anti-Pope Francis forces in the Catholic world. Those connections, traceable through a maze of non-profit organizations, helped fuel EWTN's development. It is a complex tale involving the matchup of a peculiar brand of U.S. style conservative Catholicism with conservative political ideology and economic theory.



Raymond Arroyo interviews then-candidate Donald Trump less than two weeks before the 2016 election. Trump was elected in part because of strong support from white Catholics. (YouTube/EWTN)

NCR made repeated requests over nearly a week for comment from EWTN, but the network said it was unable to produce anyone to answer questions before publication.

If Ashburn were to land the Trump interview she was teasing Sanders about, it wouldn't be EWTN's first. Less than two weeks before the 2016 presidential election — while Trump was still embroiled in the "Access Hollywood" controversy in which he was caught on tape joking about sexually assaulting women — EWTN news director and anchor Raymond Arroyo did an "exclusive" sit-down with the candidate at Trump's Miami hotel.

Arroyo asked about the tapes and gave Trump two chances to apologize or take back the extremely lewd comments about women, but the candidate insisted it was "all made up" and "just locker room talk," adding that "You can't go back. You have to look forward." In the end, he blamed the "nasty primary" and "nasty campaign."

During the 15-minute interview, Trump refused to talk about his prayer life and rambled about the Affordable Care Act being a "disaster" and religious liberty being "in tremendous trouble," but he gave clear, succinct answers when it came to an issue that is a central concern to the EWTN audience.

"You weren't always pro-life, but you now are determinedly and decidedly pro-life," said Arroyo, not exactly asking a question.

"Yes, I am pro-life," Trump affirmed.

"You said you are going to appoint judges who are pro-life," Arroyo said, again in statement form.

"Right," said Trump.

Eleven days later Trump was elected in a surprise victory, helped along, according to the Pew Research Center, by strong support from white Catholics, especially those who are regular Mass-goers — a typical EWTN viewer.

The day after Election Day at least one EWTN vice president made his vote clear. John Manos, EWTN's general counsel (and former assistant attorney general for the State of Michigan) tweeted, "When I went to vote yesterday, I said to the poll worker,

'Hold my beer and watch this!' " His tweet includes the hashtags: #Trump #TrumpTrain #Trumpocalypse #TrumpPresident

Although the network had been friendly in the past to the Republican party because of shared positions on abortion, gay marriage and religious liberty issues, EWTN's political partisanship has become more visible since Trump's election, most notably on its two news shows, "News Nightly" and "The World Over."

Both shows regularly include as guests political conservatives discussing domestic and international policies. In a 2016 interview, former House Speaker Paul Ryan told Ashburn that he would continue to defend Republican principles, as a "Catholic exercising prudential judgment in public life."

Former Trump White House advisor Steve Bannon, in a 20-minute interview with Arroyo in April, gave his opinions on church and political issues, defending the Trump administration and other "populist/nationalist/sovereignty movements" as better reflecting Catholic social teaching than Pope Francis.

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In June, EWTN News Nightly's White House correspondent covered Trump's "Make America Great Again" 2020 campaign kick-off rally in Florida, providing somewhat balanced coverage by including interviews with some less-enthusiastic attendees and even a Trump critic found at a nearby daily Mass.

But at Fox News, Trump's campaign launch coverage was less balanced, with their on-the-ground reporter calling it "an incredible display" and "an amazing accomplishment." That reporter was none other than EWTN host Arroyo, who is also the official biographer of founder Mother Angelica.

Since 2017, Arroyo has been a regular contributor to Fox News and has substituted for Laura Ingraham on her commentary show on Fox News. Ingraham has stirred considerable controversy for defending a white nationalist, mocking a Parkland school shooting survivor and calling immigrant detention facilities "summer camps."

Arroyo also joins Ingraham on her show for segments such as "Seen and Unseen," where he makes fun of Nancy Pelosi's jaw movements, or "Friday Follies," where he ridicules "political correctness."

Commentators are speculating whether Arroyo will jump ship and join Fox full-time, but for now the partnership seems to be working for both parties.

While secular alternatives to Fox News exist — from its counterpart on the left, MSNBC, to more centrist major network broadcasts — no alternatives are available to EWTN in the Catholic world. Once it overtook an early and flawed attempt by the U.S. bishops to form their own network, EWTN quickly became the only major Catholic voice on the television landscape in the United States — and that voice has gone global.

Settling into the 'Tower of Hope'

When the Diocese of Orange consecrates its new cathedral in Garden Grove, California, this month — after seven years and more than $70 million of renovations — the former "Crystal Cathedral" will have been transformed from its earlier use as the television set for the "Hour of Power," one of the most long-running and popular evangelical Protestant shows.

Whether the Crystal Cathedral's founding pastor and star, the late Rev. Robert H. Schuller, would agree with the message, he might appreciate the sheer reach of the current inhabitant of the adjacent cross-topped Tower of Hope. There, on the eighth floor, resides the newest, West Coast studio for what is today the largest religious media network in the world, the Eternal Word Television Network.



Christ Cathedral, the former Crystal Cathedral, has been transformed into a mother church for the Diocese of Orange, California. As this rendering demonstrates, the new design incorporates the elements of a Catholic church, including pews, kneelers, an altar and the cathedra, or bishop's chair. (CNS photo/courtesy Roman Catholic Diocese of Orange)

At his peak in the 1980s Schuller reached some 15 million viewers weekly. EWTN's 11 networks — broadcasting 24/7 — claim a reach of more than a quarter of a billion people worldwide in more than 145 countries and territories. EWTN programming is available through more than 6,000 TV affiliates as well as on ROKU, Apple TV, Amazon Fire and YouTube. In addition to the Orange County studio, ETWN has studios in Washington, D.C., and at the company's headquarters outside

Birmingham, Alabama.

And that's just the television portion of the business.

EWTN also provides free radio programming to more than 500 domestic and international affiliates and on SIRIUS/XM and iHeart Radio, as well as through its worldwide shortwave radio station. It also owns and operates the largest Catholic website in the United States, as well as the National Catholic Register newspaper, an English- and a Spanish-language online news wire service, a book publishing arm and a religious goods online catalog.

It is truly a global media empire, one so diversified and complex it can be difficult to estimate its total budget or net worth. The television 501c3 non-profit alone (there are at least three others) has a budget of about $50 million to $60 million a year — with the other enterprises likely contributing another $10 million, according to tax documents.

While this still pales in comparison to the roughly $400 million annual budget of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, the network founded in 1981 in the monastery garage of a then-unknown Poor Clare nun named Mother Angelica, arguably has more influence than the official church leaders, especially since their authority, already in decline, was further diminished by their mishandling of the clergy sex abuse crisis.

The bishops themselves are now apparently shaped by the EWTN empire. According to a recent study of the U.S. episcopate, the EWTN-owned National Catholic Register is the religious publication read by the most bishops, with 61 percent saying they read it.

But what the bishops — and others, Catholic and non-Catholic alike — are getting is a very particular slice of Catholicism from EWTN and its affiliate organizations, one not necessarily representative of the U.S. church as a whole. Polling and ongoing studies of the Catholic population in the United States consistently finds a far greater diversity of views and tolerance for questions than is the case on EWTN broadcasts. EWTN has become the only regularly televised image of Catholicism in America.

It is "evangelical" in the broader sense of the word, says a historian who has studied conservative Catholic movements.



Mother Angelica, pictured in an undated photo (CNS/Courtesy of EWTN)

"By taking this one orthodox approach to Catholicism out of the church and putting it on television, you're making it way more visible," said Michelle Nickerson, an associate professor of history at Loyola University Chicago. "It's declaring to Catholics and non-Catholics that this is who we are: We're here and we're staking out this ground."

The media portions of the organization — from EWTN to the Register to the Catholic News Agency — are hardly objective, doing a type of "journalism" expected on Fox News but not necessarily from what started as a devotional network where the homebound could find televised Mass and other spiritual programming.

Some may have thought that the network, under lay control since 2000, would disappear or at least decline after the death of its charismatic founder in 2016, but it has only continued to grow in size and apparent influence, especially among individuals and groups with an interest and the money to control the storyline of contemporary Catholicism.

Libertarian love-fest

In addition to its slanted political coverage, EWTN and its affiliate journalistic enterprises also have connections to economic libertarian ideologues, including EWTN governors' board member and major donor Timothy Busch, who has said he supports anti-union "right to work" laws, opposes minimum wage increases and advocates for free market capitalism as a tool for raising people out of poverty.

Busch is an attorney, wealth manager, real estate investor (including hotels and resort/spas), winery owner and philanthropist based in Southern California. He and his brothers also own a chain of upscale food markets cofounded by their late father in Michigan.

He also is behind the Napa Institute, which combines conservative theology and libertarian economics, and its new co-organization, the Napa Legal Institute, which has made health care a priority.

Two months after Trump's inauguration, Busch used the occasion of an opening Mass for a conference at the Catholic University of America business school that bears his name to praise the new presidency.

Speaking at the beginning of Mass — televised by EWTN — from the sanctuary of the Crypt Church of the Basilica of the National Shrine of the Immaculate Conception in Washington, D.C., Busch called the moment "a time when many of us as Catholics saw it as a time of darkness and now we see a time of light."

"We will in the next day learn more in our hearts and our minds where this next term will take us, and we pray it will be for greatness to restore our country," Busch said, according to NCR reporting.

The business school, named for Busch after his $15 million gift to the university, also previously hosted outspoken libertarian Charles Koch at an event co-sponsored by the Napa Institute.

In addition to Napa and EWTN, Busch is involved in other conservative Catholic organizations and causes, including as a "cooperator" for Opus Dei, a conservative lay and clerical organization, and a longtime member of Legatus, an organization for wealthy Catholic business leaders. He also co-founded and chairs the board of the Magis Center, which describes itself as a faith-and-reason institute.

Magis (and its partner apologetics organization Credible Catholic — both ministries of former Gonzaga University president Jesuit Fr. Robert Spitzer) is headquartered on the Christ Cathedral campus, just one floor above the EWTN studios, leading one publication to call the building a "Catholic Super Center."

Other neighbors in the Tower of Hope include the Colorado-based Augustine Institute , an organization dedicated to the "new evangelization" and founded by several graduates of Franciscan University of Steubenville at the request of then-Denver Archbishop Charles Chaput.

> "When religion links itself to political causes, it always turns out badly for religion."
>
> Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa
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Also on the ninth floor is Dynamic Catholic, which specializes in Catholic content and resource creation. It was founded by motivational speaker Matthew Kelly, whose secular business consulting clients include the Department of Defense, the U.S. Navy and Air Force, McDonald's, Procter & Gamble and FedEx.

The plan is to make the cathedral campus home to "multiple movements" in the church, Busch told a Breitbart reporter in 2014. "This is going to create great synergies among those ministries, to collaborate on donor bases and organizational structure," he said.

In fact, the idea for the diocese to purchase the Crystal Cathedral was Busch's, according to an article detailing the involvement of multiple Legatus members in the decision and funding. "It's like going to a Legatus meeting," one Legatus member said of meetings of the Cathedral Guild, a group of major donors to the project.

And Busch's former law firm, Busch & Caspino (since split) represented the diocese in court for the purchase of the cathedral, even convincing Schuller to accept the diocese's lower bid of $57.5 million for the property worth an estimated $500 million.

Busch, who joined the EWTN board in 2017, is a staunch supporter of the Republican Party and candidates. An analysis of his recent political contributions indicates only GOP recipients, including candidates and organizations in Missouri, Virginia, North Carolina, Massachusetts, Idaho, Vermont, Oklahoma as well as California.

EWTN's alignment with Busch, fellow board member Frank Hanna III and other individuals, as well as organizations such as Fox News and the Catholic University of America, has either been done knowingly as a strategy, or the network is being unintentionally used by outsiders, said a theologian who studies religion and history.

Either way, "it's a dangerous game," said Jesuit Fr. Mark Massa, director of the Boisi Center for Religion and American Public Life at Boston College

"While they claim to be simply trying to educate Catholics in useful piety and a robust spiritual life, they're being used by people on the right for their own purposes," Massa told NCR. "Either they are disingenuous or not awake."

This merging of ideological and political causes with theological ones is concerning. Said Massa: "When religion links itself to political causes, it always turns out badly for religion."

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