News



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Maryknoll Father Robert Astorino, founder of UCA News and executive director of the agency for 30 years, died at age 77 June 25, 2020, in a hospital near the mission society's headquarters in New York State. Father Astorino is pictured in a file photo. (CNS/courtesy Maryknoll)

Maryknoll Father Robert Astorino, founder of the Asian Catholic news agency UCA News and executive director of the agency for 30 years, died June 25 at Westchester Medical Center, Valhalla, New York. He was 77 and a priest for 50 years.

Ucanews.com reported he went to Hong Kong in 1971 and, after language studies, was part of a Maryknoll team that researched the situation of youth, many of them

children of refugees from mainland China, in the Kwun Tong area of Kowloon.

Astorino, who earned graduate degrees in sociology from Fordham University and in journalism from Columbia University, both in New York City, saw that the churches of Asia needed a means of communicating their experiences and missions with one another without passing through Western filters. After conducting a feasibility study on church information needs in Asia, he launched UCA News in 1979 to provide news of and for the Catholic Church in Asia.

Catholic media professionals worldwide recalled Astorino's contributions to social communications in Asia, and his impact on Asian news worldwide.

"For decades, Father Astorino was a giant of the international Catholic press," said Greg Erlandson, director and editor-in-chief of Catholic News Service. "As founder of UCAN, he provided trustworthy news on the emerging church in Asia to the larger Catholic world. He was a friend and collaborator with Catholic News Service, and we will miss him."

Jesuit Father Michael Kelly, who succeeded Astorino as executive director of UCA News, said Astorino was especially attuned "to the needs of the emerging churches in Asia in the 1970s and '80s."

"The Catholic Church in Asia had grown and developed to a new stage, and both national and regional bishops' conferences and international agencies were sprouting up as the first fruits of the post-Vatican II renewal," Kelly noted.

"Bob married media professionalism to a passion for the church in Asia to develop its outstanding news media channel," eventually establishing 14 news bureaus to cover 22 countries, Kelly said.

In 1974, he became involved in the social communications apostolate in Hong Kong and throughout Asia. He helped launch the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office and was its assistant director for several years. He served in various positions in the Asian branches of several international Catholic media organizations, including the East Asia Catholic Press Association. He also taught journalistic writing at The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1975-1977.

In the course of shepherding UCAN, Astorino devoted his major energies to developing professionalism among Catholic journalists in Asia. He traveled

throughout the continent to conduct training seminars to develop the quality of news reporting, feature writing and analytic assessments provided by UCAN reporters and commentators. Many of those he trained not only continued to work in Catholic journalism but also went on to develop careers in secular journalism.

Barb Fraze, international editor of Catholic News Service, recalled that when Astorino would visit Catholic News Service in the early days of UCAN, he would tell her he did not care if stories were a week old. The important thing was that "the Asians did it," he would say.

Christopher Khoo, a former editor with UCAN, recalled when Astorino visited Singapore in the 1990s. Khoo said Astorino "upheld rigorous journalistic standards" and "treated staff as family."

"I was impressed with Father Bob's passion for Asian church journalism, and when he invited me to work with the Union of Catholic Asian News, I took up the offer," Khoo told Catholic News Service. "I consider him one of Asia's great missionaries, blazing the path for Asian Church journalism."

Father Raymond Finch, superior general of Maryknoll Fathers and Brothers, told CNS: "Father Astorino dedicated his life to the mission of the Church in Asia and in a special way Hong Kong. He was instrumental in holding that church up before the eyes of the world. His work with UCA News was exceptionally creative and groundbreaking."

Astorino's work on behalf of Catholic journalism drew recognition from various sources. He was appointed a member of the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications. In 1998, the Catholic Press Association in the United States recognized Astorino with the Bishop John England Award, honoring "publishers who used the Catholic press to defend the rights of religion and individuals in a free society."

Robert F. X. Astorino was born in New York City May 27, 1943, and was educated in Catholic schools there before entering Maryknoll as a seminarian.

A Mass of Christian Burial is schedule June 30 at Maryknoll's Queen of Apostles Chapel. Access is restricted because of the COVID19 pandemic.

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