News



Pope Francis accepts a copy of "Luis Antonio Tagle: Leading by Listening" from Catholic News Service Rome bureau chief Cindy Wooden as he meets journalists aboard his flight from Rome to Havana Sept. 19, 2015. (CNS/Paul Haring)



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Six months before he died, the late Cardinal John Foley praised Catholic News Service in a 2011 speech he delivered to the annual Catholic Media Convention.

Christopher Gunty remembers Foley, who headed the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications for 23 years, saying that "if Catholic News Service didn't exist, we'd have to create it."

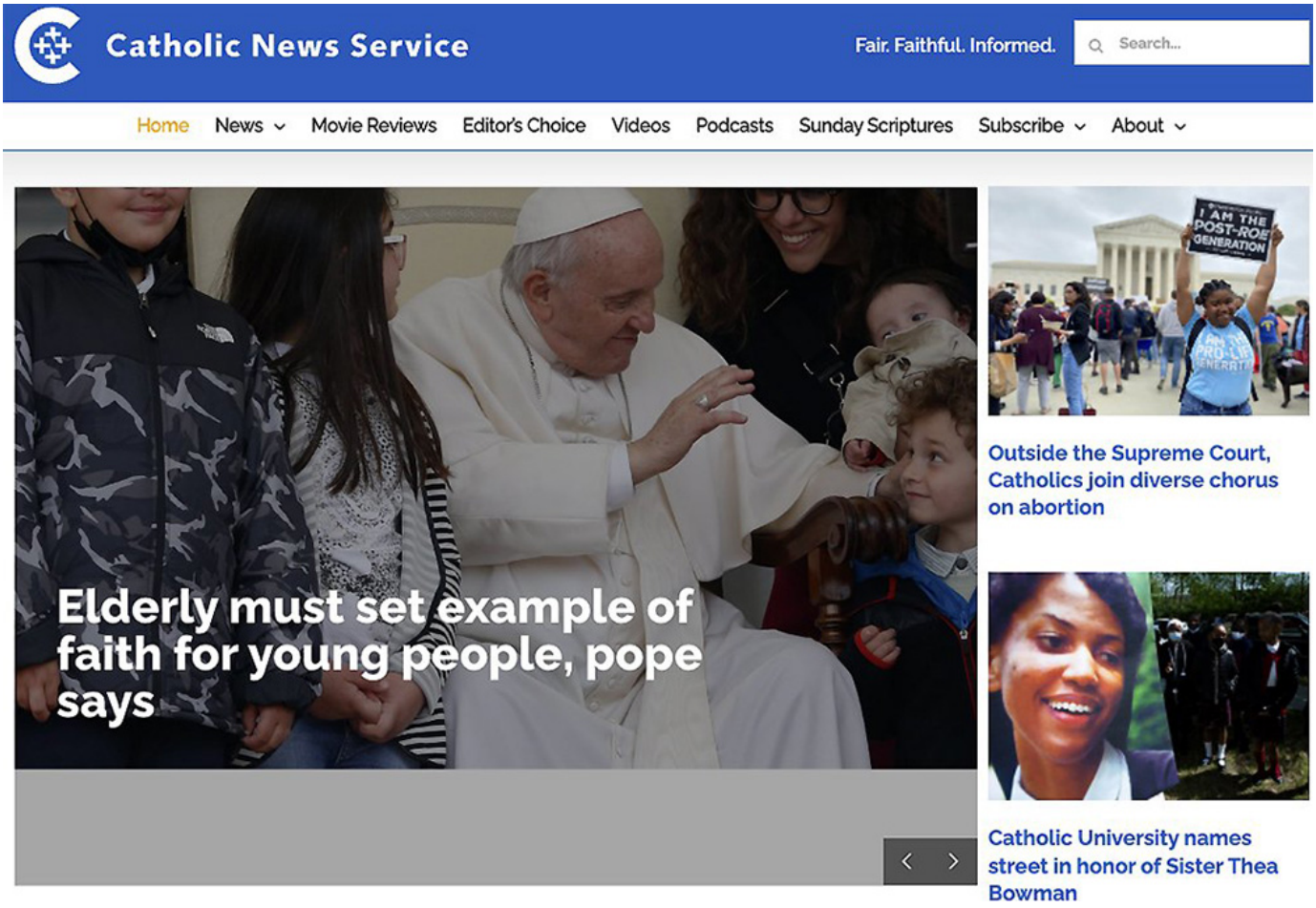
Gunty, now the associate publisher and CEO of the Catholic Review, a monthly magazine for the Archdiocese of Baltimore, says he and his paper "rely heavily on CNS to inform our readers on what's going on in the nation and the world, and without them, it's going to be nearly impossible for us to do so."

Gunty and other Catholic media professionals, as well as some Catholic bishops and communications officials, lamented the pending loss of Catholic News Service, the U.S. bishops' century-old wire service, which has been long respected for providing objective and balanced reporting on the church.

"This decision is a mistake. In this time, we need good information," said Fabrizio Mastrofini, spokesman for the Vatican's Pontifical Academy for Life, who told NCR in an email that shutting down CNS creates opportunities for ideologically driven news outlets to fill the gap.

"I do not know if U.S. bishops are really conscious about what they decided and what they provoked," Mastrofini said.

Citing financial reasons, the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced on May 4 that it plans to close CNS offices in Washington, D.C., and New York by year's end, shutting down coverage of domestic news, while maintaining its Rome bureau to continue reporting on the Vatican and international events.



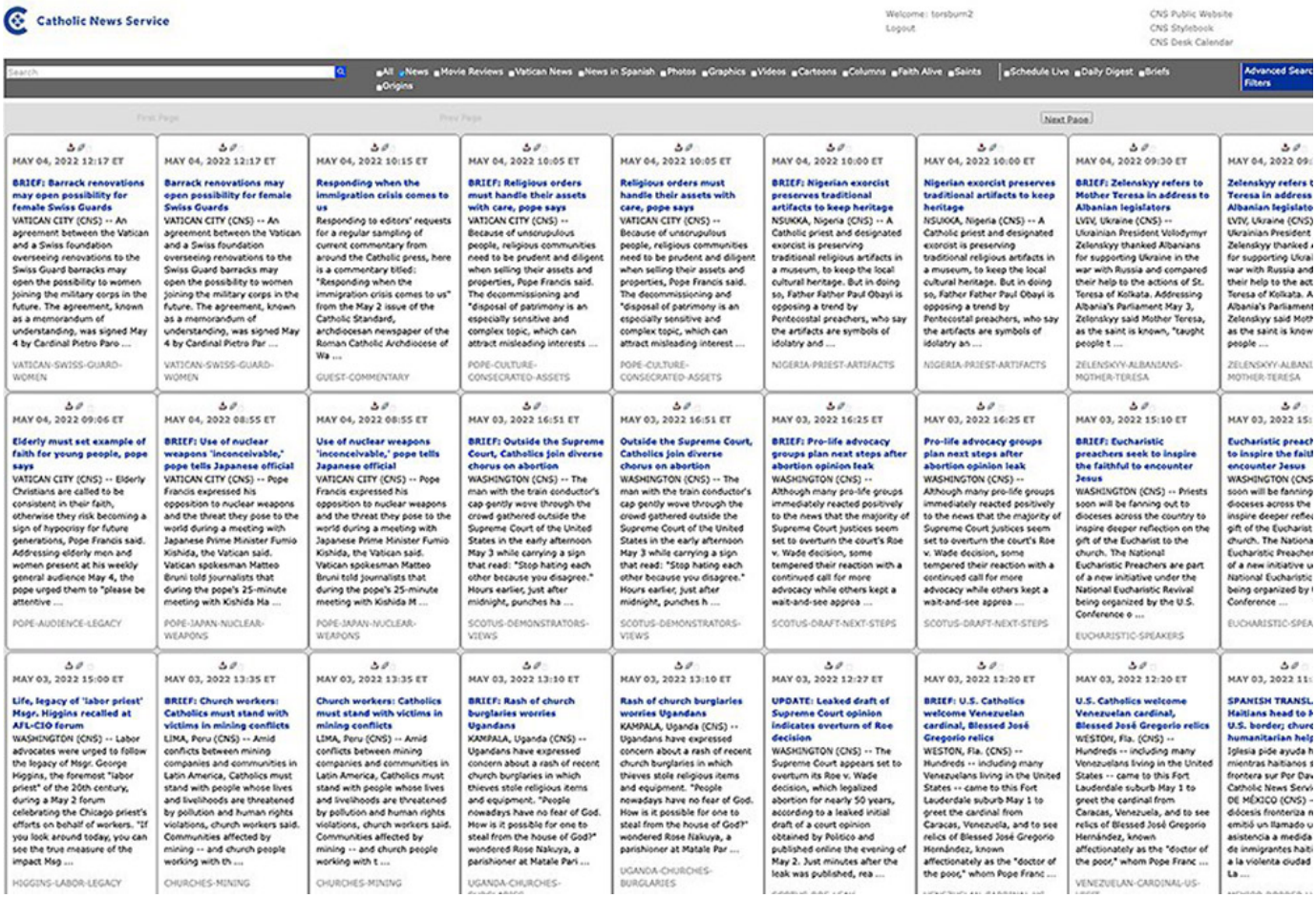
This is a screen grab of Catholic News Service's website May 4. (CNS)

In total, 21 positions — 11 of them union jobs — stand to be eliminated at Catholic News Service and the conference's public affairs, creative services and marketing and episcopal resources divisions.

"Obviously we're disappointed that the bishops would make this decision, to shut down what is a very good objective news service reporting on the church and religious issues in general. We think it's the wrong decision, and we're sorry to see it happen," said Paul Reilly, local representative for the Washington-Baltimore News Guild, which represents CNS editorial staff.

"My readers are much less informed if we don't have the news service," said Gunty, who told NCR that he wrote a letter on May 5 to Baltimore Archbishop William Lori, urging him to do what he can to prevent the bishops' conference from shuttering CNS' operations.

"I think it's a terrible idea to shut down the news service," Gunty said, adding that he hopes other diocesan news editors will also petition their bishops to intervene on CNS' behalf.



This is a screen grab of Catholic News Service's news page May 4. (CNS)

Chieko Noguchi, a spokeswoman for the bishops' conference, said in a prepared statement that the conference's Department of Communications over the next several months "will undertake a significant realignment to better utilize the resources entrusted to the [bishops' conference] by the faithful in a manner that fits the communications environment today."

Noguchi said that the changes, "although painful," will allow CNS' Rome bureau and the bishops' conference's public affairs office "a more sustainable foundation."

The May 4 announcement arrived nearly five years to the day after announcement of an earlier 2017 restructuring plan, in which the bishops said 12 jobs were being eliminated — and 10 positions created — in the communications department to

transition from a traditional print structure to a more digital model.

The U.S. bishops voted again recently to restructure the conference's communications operations, this time in a closed-door executive session last November at their general assembly in Baltimore. Two sources — a diocesan bishop and a staffer in the conference's communications department — told NCR that the bishops were presented with five different restructuring proposals to address a $2.5 million annual deficit. One idea — which the bishops rejected, according to the sources — proposed an increase in the annual assessment that dioceses pay to the conference.

Related: Catholic News Service to cease domestic operations at year's end

The bishops approved plans they knew would result in downsizing, but there appears to be uncertainty as to whether some bishops knew their vote would result in CNS' domestic operations being shut down. One bishop who spoke to NCR on the condition of anonymity to discuss matters presented in executive session said he "would have remembered something that significant."

"I think the [U.S. bishops' Committee on Priorities and Plans] genuinely wrestled with a lot of different factors, but I don't know if this outcome is exactly what was presented to us," said that bishop, who added that he was "caught by surprise" when learning of CNS' pending domestic shutdown.

"At this time, when there are so many so-called Catholic news agencies dominating the market, for us to not have an official news service, is not very wise," he said.

In an April 2020 letter, Los Angeles Archbishop José Gomez, the bishops' conference president, charged the bishops' Committee on Priorities and Plans with restructuring the conference’s communications department, which Gomez said had an outdated business model with unrealistic revenue expectations. A report that the Committee on Priorities and Plans compiled for the bishops last November — which NCR obtained — said the communications department had run a deficit for at least the past ten years.

With 22 full-time employees and an annual budget around $5.1 million, Catholic News Service represented 46% of the communication department's budget.

Over the course of five monthly virtual meetings in 2020, the Committee on Priorities and Plans devised a plan to reduce the communications department's

budget by 30%. To do so, they formulated five proposed "courses of action" that included an array of spending reductions, according to the report. Two courses of action proposed a 30% across-the-board budget cut for CNS while two others left any potential budget cuts to the discretion of the bishops' Committee on Communications.



Pope Francis meets with members of the Catholic News Service Rome bureau at the Domus Sanctae Marthae at the Vatican Feb. 1, 2021. The special audience was in recognition of the 100th anniversary of CNS. Pictured at right is CNS staffer Junno Arocho Esteves, correspondent. Fr. Paul deLadurantaye, a priest of the Diocese of Arlington, Virginia, is at center. Also in attendance were Cindy Wooden, bureau chief; Carol Glatz, correspondent; Joanna Kohorst, administrative assistant; Paul Haring, senior photographer; and Robert Duncan, multimedia journalist. (CNS/Vatican Media)

Bishop Christopher Coyne of Burlington, Vermont, said the financial foundation for Catholic News Service had been eroding for several years due to changes in media

technology and the inability of dioceses, many of them hard-hit by clergy sex abuse settlements and the COVID-19 pandemic, to continue paying for the news service.

"You could see the handwriting on the wall," said Coyne, who served on the bishops' Committee on Communications from 2012-2018 and currently sits on the Subcommittee on the Catholic Communication Campaign, of which he said a significant portion is used to pay for the bishops' conference's communications department.

With funds raised through diocesan special collections, the Catholic Communication Campaign annually distributes hundreds of thousands of dollars to support Catholic media initiatives and projects online and via radio, print and television.

The Catholic Communication Campaign raises about $4 million annually. In recent years, the subcommittee that oversees the campaign has allocated approximately $3 million to the bishops' conference's communications department, and the other $1 million to domestic and international Catholic communications needs.

According to a survey of bishops that the conference compiled in January 2021, 20 bishops said their dioceses couldn't afford a CNS subscription, while 10 other bishops said their diocesan publications use "other regional or national-level" Catholic news services.

Coyne said CNS saw "significant drops" in revenue as more dioceses in recent years closed their newspapers or shifted to platforms like FAITH Catholic, a Michigan-based nonprofit company that publishes magazines for a growing number of dioceses and religious orders.

Some Catholic organizations have also increasingly been relying on coverage from Catholic News Agency, a free wire service offered by the Eternal Word Television Network, the conservative Catholic media conglomerate. (Several U.S. bishops, including conference president Gomez, serve on EWTN's board of governors, according to the organization's tax filings.)



Some issues of Origins, the documentary service of Catholic News Service, are seen in this undated photo, along with binders for entire volumes of the publication. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)

"I think Catholic News Agency was really the death knell for CNS, because it was free, and CNS wasn't," said Coyne, who added that those economic factors made CNS' financial model "not sustainable."

Said Coyne, "Unless the bishops conference decided that keeping [Catholic News Service] was necessary and wanted to move a lot of money within the conference, but that's not the way [CNS] had been supported financially."

With subscriptions paid by diocesan and other Catholic media outlets, Catholic News Service for decades was a self-sustaining entity within the bishops' conference, so much so that the conference in the late 1980s charged CNS an assessment for its office space, which remained a sore spot for the wire service's staff.

But in recent years, the revenue that CNS brought in did not always cover normal operating expenses, according to the conference's annual financial reports. From 2016 to 2019, CNS' annual revenue ranged between $2.9 million and $3.3 million while expenses hovered around $5 million.

In 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic significantly cut down spending on budget line items like traveling, Catholic News Service operated at almost a $500,000 surplus. But that year's financial report also reveals that CNS had cut its spending on salaries and benefits by more than half since 2016. Staff members at CNS told NCR that a hiring freeze for several years had prevented positions from being filled, and that they often had to do more than what their job descriptions entailed.

"I think people here were always afraid that something like this could happen," said one CNS journalist who asked not to be identified for fear of losing their job before the end of the year. Still, the journalist said the May 4 announcement "was a shock to everyone."

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Tony Spence, the former director and editor-in-chief of Catholic News Service, told NCR that the news of CNS' shutdown arrived "like a dead bird falling on the dining room table during supper."

"There was no public indication that this was coming down the pike," said Spence, who led CNS for 12 years before stepping down in 2016. The bishops' conference asked him to resign after right-wing blogs attacked him for tweets regarding controversial religious freedom bills in Georgia and North Carolina. Those sites accused him of "promoting the LGBT agenda."

"The culture warrior bishops at the USCCB have always had a certain amount of animus to CNS because it offers straight unbiased reporting," Spence said. "Culture warriors don't want straight unbiased reporting. They want an echo chamber where everyone has the same opinion."

Spence described the bishops' plan to shut down CNS as a "huge loss" for the church.

"A lot of editors do not want to have to make the choice [of using other Catholic wire services] because those editors have professional standards and they know that CNS meets those standards," Spence said.

Gunty, of the Catholic Review in Baltimore, said that he and other Catholic diocesan news editors may have to begin their own news cooperative if the bishops' conference goes through with its plan to shutter CNS' coverage of Catholic news in the United States.

"We might end up having to share our stories," said Gunty, who referenced a survey that his publication conducted last year that indicated nine in 10 readers wanted more — not less — coverage of Catholic news across the country.

Said Gunty, "We're going to have to find other ways to do this."

A version of this story appeared in the **May 27-June 9, 2022** print issue under the headline: Officials across US church, Vatican lament closing of Catholic News Service.