Opinion
Culture
News



Pope Francis looks at a copy of the April 11, 1920, edition of the "Catholic News Sheet," during a meeting with members of the Catholic News Service Rome bureau at the Vatican Feb. 1, 2021. The special audience was in recognition of the 100th anniversary of CNS. (CNS/Vatican Media)



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In announcing the elimination of the domestic operations of Catholic News Service May 4, the American bishops delivered a brutally blunt message: The work of these lay journalists, at least in the view of the bishops, is expendable.

James Rogers, the bishops' chief communications officer, delivered the news to CNS staff without any prior consultation or discussion with them.

So much for synodal listening.

In eliminating so much of what CNS produces (the Rome bureau will continue to operate), the bishops are cutting off access to crucial news and information about the church at precisely the time Pope Francis is encouraging us to listen as closely as possible to Catholic news and views other than our own.

We recognize the challenge of sustaining high-quality journalism in the digital era, but the CNS shutdown begs the question: Is there really no spending in the bishops' budget less important than informing the people about what's going on in their church?

Although owned and operated by the bishops, CNS covers the news so reliably and evenhandedly that, on any given day, readers of NCRonline.org might find a half-dozen CNS stories among the mix of articles we publish.

When the latest edition of my diocesan newspaper, The Pilot, arrived in my mailbox in Boston, I found that seven of the 21 articles were reported by CNS, five of them from the domestic service slated for shutdown at the end of 2022. CNS produced 12 of the 24 articles in the previous issue, four of them from Rome.

With the loss of CNS, many diocesan papers will turn to the Catholic News Agency, an EWTN offshoot so well-funded that it charges nothing for its services.

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As David Gibson noted in a commentary NCR published May 12, the CNS shutdown undercuts what little credibility the bishops have left among Catholics still reeling from their failure of leadership during the clergy abuse scandal and the efforts of so many of them to deny President Joe Biden Communion.

Over the course of its 102-year history, CNS has earned a reputation for professional allegiance to accuracy and pursuit of many important issues in the church. In congratulating the news service on its 100th anniversary, an NCR editorial noted:

> Pick a significant event in the life of church or country in the past 100 years and, more than likely, a CNS reporter was there to provide clean copy for subscribers like NCR to use as needed. ...
>
> Obviously, Catholic News Service's ownership structure means certain areas of coverage aren't as "on the table" as we might like. We won't be expecting them to report intensely on movements for women's ordination or for better inclusion of LGBTQ persons in church ministries. ...
>
> But the work of CNS remains a real service, in the truest sense of the word.

If you'd like to speak up for the kind of lay-produced journalism that CNS provides, I encourage you to write to the editors of your diocesan paper so they can share your views with their bishops. If your diocese has no paper or if you have difficulty finding its site online, send your comments to CNS Director and Editor-in-Chief Greg Erlandson at gerlandson@catholicnews.com.

After all, it's your money the bishops are choosing to spend on something else.

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