This is the front page of an issue of Catholic New York, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New

This is the front page of the April 22 issue of Catholic New York, newspaper of the Archdiocese of New York. Less than three weeks after the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced that Catholic News Service would cease U.S. operations at year's end, the publication announced it will publish its last issue Nov. 17. (CNS/Tyler Orsburn)



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June 14, 2022

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One in five Americans who receives a periodical from a Catholic diocese in the mail today receives a publication from FAITH Catholic, boasts the Michigan-based nonprofit, which promotes itself as the nation's largest publisher of Catholic magazines.

Unlike a diocesan newspaper that publishes a mix of local news stories and wire content from Catholic News Service, a glossy FAITH Catholic magazine is more likely to contain catechetical articles on spiritual formation topics, profiles of well-known saints, personal witness testimonies, food and drink recipes, and advice columns.

"FAITH Magazine is the Homes and Gardens of the church," said Tony Spence, a former director and editor-in-chief of Catholic News Service. "It's nicely designed. It's bright. It has feel-good articles in it where you can get a recipe for blueberry muffins

and read feel-good things about Catholic schools."

With an aggressive marketing strategy that has helped it grow from a single diocesan magazine to a company that boasts more than 60 publications for dioceses and other Catholic organizations, FAITH Catholic's profile has risen considerably in recent years.

While FAITH Catholic's profile is rising, that of Catholic News Service is about to diminish substantially. On May 4, the U.S. bishops announced that the century-old wire service, which has traditionally provided content to diocesan newspapers across the country, will cease all domestic operations at year's end. Only its Rome bureau will continue operating, reporting on the Vatican and international events.

This is a screen grab of Catholic News Service's news page May 4, 2022.

This is a screen grab of Catholic News Service's news page May 4, 2022. The U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops announced to staff May 4 a dramatic reorganization of its communications department, including the closure of the Washington and New York offices of Catholic News Service. (CNS photo)

The decision to close CNS' domestic operations was made by the bishops' Committee on Communications. Among the formal consultants to that committee is FAITH Catholic CEO Elizabeth Solsburg. FAITH Catholic also publishes magazines for three members of the committee, including Boston Auxiliary Bishop Robert Reed, the chairman and president of the CatholicTV Network. FAITH Catholic publishes a monthly magazine for CatholicTV.

In addition, FAITH Catholic publishes a quarterly magazine for the Archdiocese of Detroit, which also uses Catholic News Service stories in its digital news site, Detroit Catholic, which succeeded the archdiocesan print newspaper in 2018. Detroit Archbishop Allen Vigneron serves as the vice president of the bishops' conference.

The decision to shutter Catholic News Service's domestic operations could indirectly benefit FAITH Catholic by hampering its print competition — diocesan newspapers — that have historically relied on CNS coverage. That prompted some Catholic media observers who spoke to NCR to point out what looks to them, on the surface at least, to be potential conflicts of interest.

"I don't know how you deal with all that. It certainly looks like there's a conflict of interest there," said Jesuit Fr. Tom Reese, a journalist who has covered the bishops' conference for decades. Reese, who is also a former editor of America magazine, told NCR it was problematic for the communications committee to rely on consultants who have financial stakes in its decisions.

"What the bishops seem to be doing is bringing lobbyists into the room and calling them consultants," Reese said, adding that it would be preferable to have independent experts consult the bishops on matters pertaining to media and journalism.

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, pictured in this 2015 file photo, is a longtime author and journalist. H

Jesuit Fr. Thomas Reese, pictured in this 2015 file photo, is a longtime author and journalist. He said it was problematic for the U.S. bishops' communications committee to rely on consultants who have financial stakes in its decisions. (CNS/Nancy Wiechec)

FAITH Catholic "is making it very clear in their own marketing materials that they're a better alternative than diocesan newspapers, and that's a voice advising that committee," Reese said. "Are there counter voices? Are there diocesan editors advising the committee to give the other side?"

Reed and Vigneron did not respond to NCR requests for interviews to talk about the decision to close CNS.

Alex Russo, a media studies professor at the Catholic University of America, called on the bishops' communications committee to publicly explain in detail the rationale for shutting down the wire service's coverage of domestic news.

"Likewise, I would like to hear something from the folks at Faith Catholic that would speak to the implementation of journalistic standards for coverage for at least part of how their operations function," Russo said. "It might well be that they can certainly offer a visually appealing kind of product. And if this sort of closure has to go forward, I think it would certainly behoove them, and be to the ultimate benefit of the church, to have transparent independently-reported news as part of that package."

NCR reached out to Solsburg for an interview about her role as a consultant for the bishops' committee. A spokeswoman for FAITH Catholic directed NCR to a prepared statement, attributed to Solsburg, which was posted on FAITH Catholic's website in early June. In the statement, Solsburg said she was unaware that the bishops were "even considering" the idea to shut down Catholic News Service. Solsburg said she was "very surprised" when the bishops announced the news May 4.

"In fact, I called [Catholic News Service director and editor-in-chief] Greg Erlandson in December to explore ways to make CNS more affordable for all of FAITH's clients, so that we could increase Catholic News Service subscribers," Solsburg said in the statement.

> 'The U.S. bishops certainly need to improve upon their credibility and transparency, and the elimination of an independent news organization dedicated to coverage of their activities would certainly not help them.'
>
> —Alex Russo
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James Rogers, the chief communications officer for the bishops' conference, told NCR in an interview that Solsburg was not involved in any discussions related to the planned closure of Catholic News Service's national operations.

"She was not a part at all of the decision-making process," said Rogers, adding that Solsburg's first appearance for a committee discussion occurred after the conference had already announced its plans for Catholic News Service.

"She would not have had an opportunity to influence [the decision] one way or the other," he said.

The bishops' announcement about closing Catholic News Service's domestic operations shocked many in Catholic media, including CNS journalists who told NCR last month that they had no prior knowledge of the plan. The official announcement was short on details and explanations.

Speaking with sources, including a diocesan bishop and a staffer in the conference's communications department, NCR learned that the bishops — at their November

2021 general assembly in Baltimore — were presented with five restructuring proposals to address a $2.5 million annual deficit. The bishops voted in a closed-door executive session to restructure the conference's communications operations. The bishops' approved course of action gave the communications committee the discretion to determine how to streamline the communications department, which encompasses Catholic News Service.

Russo criticized the bishops' conference and its communications committee for not being transparent to the public about their plans and reasoning for closing a respected century-old news service.

"The U.S. bishops certainly need to improve upon their credibility and transparency, and the elimination of an independent news organization dedicated to coverage of their activities would certainly not help them in that direction," Russo told NCR.

Rogers declined to delve into the conference's decision-making process regarding Catholic News Service. He told NCR that the conference considered "a whole range of options and questions" and had to make "difficult decisions" that he said were not "value judgements" on CNS.

"But at the end of the day, the fundamental question for implementation is how best do we prioritize the resources that we have available to us," he said. "We simply don't have unlimited resources, and that requires a lot of very painful decisions."

Rogers said the bishops decided to prioritize news coverage of the pope's ministry. He said the CNS bureau in Rome "will be able to do editorial planning as they always have done."

"We may argue it's naïve, but my prayer is certainly that it becomes a point of great communion for the church," he said. "So, I think the journalists at CNS Rome have now even more so a very important job moving forward."

Filling the CNS void

Catholic media observers have warned that the loss of Catholic News Service's national coverage creates a void that ideologically driven outlets will move to fill. One agency that seemingly would stand to benefit is the Catholic News Agency, a free wire service offered by the Eternal Word Television Network, the conservative Catholic media conglomerate. Archbishop José Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. bishops conference, sits on EWTN's board of governors.

Related: By closing Catholic News Service, bishops show they've lost interest in civic engagement

"Gomez as being on the EWTN board appears to have both an ideological and financial stake at issue. Swapping out Catholic News Agency for Catholic News Service would help EWTN financially, I suspect," said David DeCosse, director of Religious and Catholic Ethics at the Markkula Center for Applied Ethics at Santa Clara University.

Gomez did not respond to an NCR request for an interview about the closure of CNS.

The demise of CNS' domestic coverage also creates an opportunity for FAITH Catholic, which may represent the future of Catholic diocesan print media, even if its magazines are relatively light on hard news reporting.

On its website, FAITH Catholic says each diocese that uses the company to develop their diocesan periodicals has full control over its magazine content and plans each issue with the company. The diocesan editorial staff can use their own local stories and photographs while having access to columns, special reports and other features that FAITH Catholic makes available. The diocesan staff also proofreads, sells ads and pays for postage. FAITH Catholic designs, prints and mails the magazine, and creates an online version of each issue.

"You get a once-a-month magazine coming into your house," Spence told NCR. "It's a feel-good thing, but there's nothing challenging in it about how you view your faith or that gets you to think more deeply about issues facing the church right now."

Russo said FAITH Catholic "can offer appealing explanations of different aspects of the Catholic faith and different activities and personalities that are part of different dioceses, which is all quite wonderful and useful in its own right."

"But it's not the same as having an independently operating journalistic operation, which may or may not always be up to different bishops' liking, but which I think is crucial to maintaining trust in the processes by which the institutional church is operating," he added.

However, a shifting media landscape — where newspaper advertising revenues have cratered as more young people consume digital media and many dioceses face ongoing financial struggles — has compelled a growing number of bishops to

reconsider the value of journalism and the role of the Catholic press.

"FAITH Catholic has been contacting diocesan editors and bishops for many years. They try to convince the bishops that a glossy magazine is a way to bring more people into the church," said Sam Lucero, who is retiring in July after nearly 15 years as editor of The Compass newspaper in the Diocese of Green Bay, Wisconsin.

The Diocese of Green Bay announced on May 17 that The Compass, heretofore a weekly newspaper, will instead be printed on a biweekly basis "for the foreseeable future." Lucero told NCR that "there is a possibility" that The Compass may change to a magazine format in the near future, which he said factored into his decision to retire.

"I feel it's all just part of this new culture of the Internet and we no longer have leaders who share with the bishops the importance of a print publication like a newspaper that offers information, formation and inspiration," Lucero said. "Whereas I feel that FAITH magazine is more about all inspiration and no controversy, which can cloud the transparency part of journalism."

Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Arlington, Va., Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, presid

Bishop Michael F. Burbidge of Arlington, Va., Archbishop José H. Gomez of Los Angeles, president of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, and Auxiliary Bishop Andrew H. Cozzens of St. Paul and Minneapolis, attend a Nov. 16, 2021, news conference during the bishops' fall general assembly in Baltimore. At the podium is Chieko Noguchi, USCCB director of public affairs. At that meeting, the bishops voted in a closed-door executive session to restructure the conference's communications operations. (CNS/Bob Roller)

Since beginning in 2000 as a magazine for the Diocese of Lansing, Michigan, FAITH Catholic has grown to a publishing juggernaut it says reaches more than 2.4 million households. The organization generated more than $8.1 million in revenue for the period from July 1, 2016 through June 30, 2017, according to its most recently available federal tax filing.

FAITH Catholic has made inroads into dioceses in part by telling bishops and church leaders that it can save them money in printing and distribution costs for a product that the company says is more appealing for readers and effective from an

evangelization standpoint. FAITH Catholic cites its own readership surveys to argue that the magazines have longer "shelf lives" than newspapers and are better at motivating readers to donate their time and money to their parishes and annual diocesan appeals.

The market forces behind FAITH Catholic's sales pitch have led a growing number of bishops across the country in recent years to stop publishing diocesan newspapers, which have traditionally comprised the bulk of Catholic News Service's subscriber base. On May 19, the Archdiocese of New York notified archdiocesan employees that its biweekly newspaper, Catholic New York, will publish its final print issue on Nov. 17.

Some dioceses that have closed their newspapers have moved news content online. Among dioceses that still produce print publications, several have moved in favor of FAITH Catholic magazines that are published monthly, bimonthly, quarterly or on a seasonal basis.

"Because of financial reasons, more bishops today are no longer publishers of diocesan newspapers," Reese said. "They're trying to figure out what the future is, and they've decided the future is without CNS, which I think is a terrible mistake."

Solsburg, the FAITH Catholic CEO, said in her prepared statement that approximately 20 of the company's publishing partners are Catholic News Service subscribers. She added that FAITH Catholic "has long valued CNS and its excellent journalism." She described its planned closure as "a great loss."

Advertisement

An NCR review of the most recent issues of 29 diocesan Faith Catholic publications turned up one magazine — the June 2022 issue of Central Minnesota Catholic in the Diocese of St. Cloud, Minnesota — that contained Catholic News Service content in the print edition. The St. Cloud diocese and at least nine other dioceses that partner with FAITH Catholic to publish magazines also have links to CNS stories on their homepages or on separate digital news sites.

The looming loss of Catholic News Service's domestic coverage will result in reduced content for those diocesan news sites. Rogers, of the bishops' conference, said the CNS Rome bureau's international coverage will be provided free of charge to clients.

But even with the financial constraints on dioceses, Russo said there is still "no way to get around" paying for quality journalism.



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)

"The idea that you can have quality news content for free was decisively shown to not work in the first decade of the 21st century," Russo said. "I think we need to heed those lessons and recognize that investments in high-quality independent journalism pay dividends in terms of the kinds of transparency and ways in which it can illuminate and hold different parties accountable for their decision-making, to inform folks on what's going on in their church, and ultimately being done in their name."

In her statement, Solsburg said that "a Catholic perspective on major news is critical," adding that FAITH Catholic publications "regularly provide special reports

on current events." She also said that the company believes the principal purpose of today's Catholic communications is to "help people encounter Jesus Christ and engage or re-engage with his Church."

Her statement is consistent with essays on FAITH Catholic's website that refer to Catholic journalists as "content evangelizers." An undated column written by Patrick O'Brien, the founding president and CEO of FAITH Catholic who helped create FAITH Magazine for the Diocese of Lansing in 2000 and left the company in January 2021, describes Catholic reporters and editors as evangelists and "essential [aides]" to their bishop.

"In other words, it is a higher call to be an evangelist than a journalist," O'Brien wrote. "When the ideals of journalism appear to take precedence over being a disciple who evangelizes, the diocesan journalist can lose his or her way."

> 'We're journalists. If we practice our craft, and do it professionally, it'll open up the doors to people to embrace discipleship. But I don't think the bishops understand that.'
>
> —Sam Lucero
>
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That view of Catholic journalists makes some longtime reporters and editors in the Catholic press uneasy.

"In the good old days, you had a strict line between opinion and journalism," Reese said. "That line has gotten so fuzzy in recent times."

Lucero, of The Compass newspaper in Green Bay, said he believes there is a hesitancy among most professional Catholic journalists to be referred to as evangelizers because their role is to report the news.

"We're journalists," Lucero said. "If we practice our craft, and do it professionally, it'll open up the doors to people to embrace discipleship. But I don't think the bishops understand that."

A version of this story appeared in the **June 24-July 7, 2022** print issue under the headline: Ideological outlets fill CNS void.