Opinion

Guest Voices



A statue at the entrance to the EWTN studios in Irondale, Alabama, on Jan. 8, 2019. (RNS/Jack Jenkins)



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"The work of the devil" is how two years ago Pope Francis labeled EWTN, the Eternal Word Television Network, a Catholic media empire known for its conservative programming. More recently, instead of sending in an exorcist, he blessed a movie produced by EWTN of Ireland.

While not directly mentioning EWTN, the pope said at a 2021 meeting with Jesuits in Slovakia, "There is, for example, a large Catholic television channel that has no hesitation in continually speaking ill of the pope." He acknowledged, "I personally deserve attacks and insults because I am a sinner, but the church does not deserve them. They are the work of the devil." Everyone knew he was speaking of EWTN.

EWTN was founded in 1981 by Mother Angelica, the most successful Catholic communicator since Bishop Fulton Sheen was a national phenomenon on radio in the 1930s and 1940s and on television in the 1950s and 1960s.

The U.S. bishops' early attempt to develop a satellite TV network failed because they spent millions on hardware, which quickly became obsolete, but little on programming. Each bishop wanted to control the programming in his diocese, which made it impossible to have a national effort. Their later attempt to have a cable presence was killed after being viciously attacked on air by Mother Angelica.

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Mother Angelica became known for her conservative piety and attacks on progressives — whom she deemed heretics — and she wasn't shy in attacking bishops and cardinals. Some of her rants were so off the wall that even EWTN does not distribute them anymore. During a Vatican investigation of her ministry in 2000, she gave up control to a lay board, which made it more difficult for the Vatican to intervene.

EWTN has become a worldwide media empire, which says it reaches 250 million people in 140 countries. In the United States, besides its cable TV outlet, it operates a newspaper (the National Catholic Register) and a wire service (Catholic News Agency). Now that Catholic News Service, the bishops' wire service, has shut down everything except its Rome bureau, CNA is the major source for news used in diocesan publications.

The National Catholic Register was a failing newspaper when it was taken over by EWTN, but subscribers multiplied after being advertised on EWTN. Most of the network's operation is funded by loyal viewers, who like its traditional piety, and major donors, such as Timothy Busch, who like its politics.

The pious programming includes broadcasting the Mass, Benediction, Stations of the Cross, lives of the saints, lectures, recitation of the rosary and other prayers. Let me be clear: I am not objecting to any of this, although much of it is pre-Vatican II piety. Supporters of the traditional Latin Mass have also appeared on the network.

Noteworthy, however, is what is missing. There is no coverage of the social justice concerns of the church, such as racism, inequality or global warming. Abortion and gender issues are the only social issues on EWTN's radar.

Its news programming is accused of having a Republican tilt, leading some of its critics to refer to it as the Fox News of Catholicism. Raymond Arroyo, who hosts EWTN's "The World Over," appears frequently on Fox News. Arroyo spends much of his program attacking Democrats and the "woke" elites. He is also critical of Pope Francis and has hosted a "papal posse" of fellow detractors.

Arroyo does not pretend to be straight news, but what about "EWTN News Nightly"? Just looking at recent coverage, it is revealing that "News Nightly" devoted only 25 seconds to Donald Trump's loss in a sexual assault and defamation lawsuit but three and a half minutes to a May 4 lead story on the House Republican investigation of the Biden family. George Santos' indictment got 20 seconds.



Raymond Arroyo speaks at the 2018 Student Action Summit hosted by Turning Point USA at the Palm Beach County Convention Center in West Palm Beach, Florida, on Dec. 21, 2018. (Wikimedia Commons/Gage Skidmore)

Likewise, for its coverage of Trump's town hall meeting on CNN, there was no discussion of his lies. Rather, EWTN had John Ullyot of Brighton Strategy Group on to wax eloquent about how well Trump did. Nor did it focus on Trump's unwillingness during the town hall to support a national ban on abortion. This is extraordinary given that pro-life matters are a major focus of EWTN. Trump got a pass even on abortion.

Its extensive coverage of the crisis at the border also included all the Republican talking points. While giving Republicans significant time to argue their case, it only devoted 12 seconds on May 9 to reporting that the U.S. bishops were urging Congress to enact real immigration reform and to treat migrants with dignity, love and respect. Another 20-second story on May 8 reported that Bishop Mark Seitz opposed the House Republican bill to "secure the border."

Likewise, on the debt ceiling debate, no mention was made that much of the debt came from the Trump tax cuts. It was all about Biden spending.

Most disappointing was the appearance on May 3 of Larry O'Connor, host of "O'Connor Tonight" on the Salem News Channel. After attacking the New York proposal to outlaw new gas appliances, he stated: "This is all part of the green energy religion in this country where people have replaced God with the environment. They are going back to pagan days, worshiping trees and the sun, and it is ridiculous."

The EWTN host did not challenge him. Instead, she laughed along with him at the absurdity of the environmental movement. No recognition was given to the climate crisis.

Republican commentators like O'Connor and Ullyot dominate the EWTN airwaves. Clearly, EWTN gives greater respect and attention to Republican politicians and commentators than to the positions of the U.S. bishops and the pope, yet it prides itself as a "Catholic" network.

In the past, EWTN has also given airtime to critics of Pope Francis such as Archbishop Carlo Maria Viganò. This month it has been promoting a Mass celebrated at the Blue Army shrine in New Jersey by Cardinal Raymond Burke, another critic of Francis. In the ad, it mistakenly refers to him as "Leo" Burke.

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While I normally don't waste my time watching EWTN, I am a daily reader of CNA and ACI Africa. With the death of CNS, CNA has become mandatory reading for Catholic news junkies like myself. Our Sunday Visitor has tried to pick up the slack caused by the demise of CNS, but it does not have the resources of EWTN. OSV charges publications for its wire service; CNA is free.

With much less funding, the National Catholic Reporter, America and Religion News Service have better but fewer reporters than CNA. Sadly, progressive Catholics do

not support Catholic media the way conservative Catholics do.

With regard to CNA, it is important to distinguish between news and commentary. The commentary is very conservative, but I find Catholic news covered in CNA that I do not find elsewhere. For the most part, it is straight news coverage. Likewise, "Vaticano," a half-hour weekly program on EWTN, presents positive stories from Rome.

Francis seems to have moderated his view on EWTN because he recently gave his blessing to "Faith of Our Fathers," a movie by EWTN of Ireland.

Critics of EWTN, even the pope, need to be nuanced. Its commentary on politics and the church is terrible. Programs like "News Nightly" and "The World Over" are propaganda arms of the Republican Party. But CNA and ACI Africa cover Catholic news missed by other outlets, and who can object to devotional programs that many older Catholics find nourishing.

Progressive Catholics need to confess, we are jealous. We wish we were as successful as EWTN.