

Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (<https://www.ncronline.org>)

July 17, 2010 at 3:05pm

A Tribute to Nancy Frazier O'Brien

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NCR Today

Reporters were once prone to treat official Vatican pronouncements with the deference expected of them by the Curia -- authoritative, binding and beyond dispute. The idea that opposing voices could be valid and newsworthy was slow to dawn, aided by the sex abuse scandals and open challenges to church authority. But the old presumption that the only views that count are clerical and hierarchical ones hasn't entirely disappeared, of course, and coverage can suffer because of it. Besides, it's easier to go along with the notion that the official statement is the last word.

Nancy Frazier O'Brien's piece for Catholic News Service on Archbishop Weurl's attempt to explain the Vatican's yoking together child sexual abuse and women's ordination as "grave crimes" could have limited itself to the archbishop's effort to assure Catholic women that the stigmatizing of women's ordination meant no disrespect for women in general. But she went the extra mile to seek out the executive director of that Women's Ordination Conference and the WomenPriests group for their responses.

That added dimension is what distinguishes outstanding reporting from routine coverage. The late, excellent journalist, David Halberstam, called it the willingness to make "one more call" to check out another aspect of the story.

O'Brien took such initiative and demonstrated sterling journalistic integrity by enlarging the compass of her story. Both readers and good journalism are the better for it. She has my gratitude.

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