

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

July 28, 2010 at 6:48am

In Defense of Sister Mary Ann Walsh

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Distinctly Catholic

Yesterday, I published a response from Sister Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations at the USCCB, as part of my Q & A series. Sister Mary Ann referred to an earlier incident in which the Catholic News Agency published an article that attributed quotes to Cardinal Francis George, the president of the USCCB, but which both Walsh, and Cardinal George for that matter, deny he ever made.

Sister Mary Ann's comments have predictably caught the attention of some rightwing critics. The Catholic Key blog, the official blog of the diocese of Kansas City-St. Joseph, was disappointed that Sister Mary Ann did not use the occasion to question the orthodoxy of some of the writers here at NCR. This criticism was echoed by Father Z, whose blog *What Does the Prayer Really Say?* is to crazy conservative Catholic thought what a honey comb is to bees.

It is typical of both the Catholic Key and Father Z that they ignore the central contention made by Sister Mary Ann. She did not accuse the writers of the original CNA story of being unorthodox. She accused them of bad journalism: You can't just make stuff up when you are a journalist and you have to make sure that your sources are accurate. Sister Mary Ann is not the head of the doctrinal committee, she is the head of the media-relations department. And her point, confirmed anew by the Catholic Key and Father Z, is that where theology and canon law require subtle analysis, too often some media outlets practice what she precisely, and accurately, termed *meat cleaver?* journalism.

Here at NCR, we oftentimes run an article with which I disagree profoundly. And, if the comments on this blog are any measure, I write many posts that meet with something less than agreement by our readers. There is room for discussion, even room for error, in our intra-Church debates and discussions without recourse to charges of heterodoxy. It is abundantly clear that the bishops, being pastors, understand that fact even if certain media outlets fail to see it. And, it is abundantly clear that Sister Mary Ann, who is the

spokesperson for the bishops' conference understands that fact. I have no idea how often she and Cardinal George speak on the phone, but I would be surprised if they are not on speed dial with each other.

In the Q & A, I always solicit a comment from someone at the USCCB. Why? Because too often the blogosphere debate takes place in a parallel universe, not to say a parallel magisterium. And, it is more than a little ironic that some of those who worry about a "parallel magisterium" are quick to challenge the bishops whenever they do not get their way. Think of the witch-hunt mounted against the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, which has seen genuine concerns mixed in with ridiculous charges. The U.S. bishops are many things, but slackers on the pro-life issue is not one of those things.

Often articles are written based on what someone thinks the bishops said, not what they actually said. In planning this new blog, and conceiving of the idea of a daily Q & A, I aspire to give the official spokespeople of our bishops a venue to say what they want to say, without editorial comment, or editorial manipulation from the right or the left. It seems to me that this is one of the things journalists should be doing. I also solicit the opinions of non-official experts and analysts, even non-Catholics. I thought that Michel Martin's comments on the Shirley Sherrod case were especially interesting, making a point that had not been made - Ms. Sherrod was giving a testimony in her remarks. Ms. Martin, who attends a Methodist church, made a point that was worthy of Catholic ears.

The Catholic blogosphere is a strange new universe. Especially among the more conservative sites, news and faux news travel with the speed of light and a false claim, such as those contained in the initial CNA story, go viral very quickly. Someone doing a Google search the day after the CNA story broke would think that with all these different sites linking to the story, it must be true. It wasn't true. One of the reasons for the Yahoo Watch is to make sure that a reporter, or simply an interested person, doing such a Google search will find at least one post that questions the veracity of some of the smears and lies that get bandied about by modem. Indeed, the Shirley Sherrod episode, as Sister Mary Ann pointed out, is the immediate by-product of the culture of the instant-smear. And, if you doubt how ugly those smears and lies can get, check out the comments on Father Z's post. Some of them are horrifying, unchristian, and vile.

I think Sister Mary Ann's remarks yesterday were spot-on. Others may think they evidenced a bias. Others may think she did not go far enough. But, I think her point was well made: There is a difference between journalism and propaganda; there is a difference between analysis and name-calling; There is a difference between disagreement and heresy. These points were not only well-made by Sister Mary Ann, they are points that cannot be made often enough.

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