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Just like old times -- Mr. Smith takes on NCR -- and we keep coming back for more

by Joe Feuerherd

NCR Today

In the 48 years since the first edition of the *National Catholic Reporter* was published, we've had some occasionally tumultuous interactions with our friends at the Kansas City-St. Joseph, Mo., diocese.

NCR's Second Annual Webathon, where we come to our loyal electronic readership to solicit support for ncronline.org, seemed a good time to share some of that history -- and to bring it up to date.

But first, dear reader, stop reading. That's right, I'm committing the highest of editorial sins by instructing you to click away from these carefully crafted words. Instead, **go here**, right now, and make a donation that shows your support for the independent Catholic journalism only *NCR* provides. Below, you'll see an example of why that support is essential to what we do.

Now, back to our story.

Charles Helmsing, the Kansas City bishop who initially authorized *NCR's* existence (in the days when such things were necessary), soon regretted his decision. Yup, Helmsing later lamented that was one he wished he could pull back.

You see, our reporting on the pope's birth control commission -- we published the findings of the lay-led panel, which supported married couples' right to use "artificial means" of birth control -- did not, shall we say, please Helmsing. He played hardball.

The bishop moved to have the word "Catholic" removed from our banner. He tried to shut us down. Emergency board meetings were held, compromises considered (I know because I've read the minutes).

But it soon became clear that *NCR* had moved beyond the need for an episcopal imprimatur. We kept publishing, Catholics kept subscribing, and we're still here.

Sure, there are many challenges in publishing today, particularly in Catholic publishing, and subscription and advertising revenue are not enough to float the whole boat. But five decades later and we're as strong as ever.

Our survival, our continuing success, is a source of considerable frustration to those who do not like what we publish. (Which, in turn, is a cause of considerable delight to those of us responsible for *NCR* -- is such a *schadenfreude* moment an occasion of sin?) There were many other disputes with Helmsing related to our coverage and commentary on women's ordination, optional celibacy (permission for which seemed right around the corner), remarriage after divorce, and more.

You name it, we covered it, which was, to say the least, not the tradition of the Catholic press. But Vatican II had just concluded and it seemed that *aggiornamento* extended to the newsroom. The rules were being rewritten and the editors, reporters and subscribers of *NCR* were among those doing the rewriting. The cutting edge can be dangerous, but that is where *NCR* sat.

Through the years some American bishops -- some more than others -- attacked the very idea that Catholic journalism can be what Americans consider "real" journalism. At *NCR*, we've explained to them and their functionaries over the years that we're not in the evangelization business; saving souls is important work, but it is not our work. We are, rather, journalists -- we want the story, the facts and the truth, not some version of events cooked up in a chancery to serve some perceived greater good or avoid some "scandal."

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In those good old days, *NCR*'s editors cared less about running first Communion photos featuring the extraordinary ordinary -- typical fare found in the Catholic press. Instead, our predecessors enjoyed (and we continue to do so) reporting the so-called "scandal" -- meaning it is something the ordinary did not want you to know about.

Unfortunately, there's plenty of it, and so few publications are willing to take it on. That shining the light in some of the church's darker hovels is an important element of what we do.

Kind of like the good daily city newspaper reporting the foibles of the mayor and city council as they award the latest garbage contract to a favored vendor. Done, to be sure, with a measure of understanding, even affection ("They're at it again?"), but done nonetheless. Messy but necessary.

So it came as little surprise when Jack Smith, editor of the Kansas City-St. Joseph diocesan paper, *The Catholic Key*, and its often entertaining electronic offshoot, The Catholic Key Blog (couldn't he have come up with a less pedestrian name for the electronic rag?), took some potshots at his Kansas City neighbors. Smith, you see, doesn't like the idea that, for 12 years running, *NCR* has been the winner of the Catholic Press Association's General Excellence Award for a national newspaper.

Twelve consecutive years. We're either better than the Yankees in their heyday or stronger than the Harlem Globetrotters in their match-ups against the consistently-flawed Washington Generals.

"Not to take anything away from the fine things that do appear in the *Reporter*," Smith, damning with the

faintest of praise, wrote recently on the *Key*'s blog, "but the CPA award committee seems to explicitly grant favor to the publication *because* of its dissent from church teaching."

Compare that, says Smith, to the work of the *National Catholic Register*.

"In contrast, the citation accompanying *National Catholic Register*'s third-place finish in 2008 seems to indicate the publication was disfavored for its *lack* of dissent: "*The Register* is largely unquestioning in its loyalty to church teachings and policies, but it carries out its apparent mission of supporting the church in a big way." ?

Smith simply doesn't get it. During the time he recalls, the *The Register* was owned by the Legionaries of Christ, the now-disgraced religious order founded by child rapist Fr. Marcial Maciel Degollado, a favorite of Pope John Paul II. During this time, the "*The Register* spilled countless gallons of ink defending the indefensible Maciel. It was, objectively speaking, a genuinely shabby performance.

Meanwhile, the *National Catholic Reporter* devoted resources, financial and otherwise, to uncovering Maciel's many misdeeds. Through the work of award-winning journalist Jason Berry and our Kansas City-based editorial team, we ferreted out the facts, dug for the truth, reported the story.

In other words, we practiced journalism, not triumphalistic Catholicism.

Are those who objected to Maciel's cult-like influence in the church "dissenters"? Hardly. Many of those folks remain as "conservative" or "orthodox" as they were prior to the reporting of the serial rapist's felonious assaults. Their love for the church, their respect for the Holy Father, did not run so deep that their theology trumped their decency. They, like the judges at the Catholic Press Association, possess the integrity that leads to appreciation when the press does its job in revealing such a "scandal."

The CPA award (granted by a committee of "real" journalists) was, in other words, based on merit, not crony Catholicism.

Today, *NCR* continues to cover the laypeople and bishops (there are a few left) who question mandatory celibacy, the all-male priesthood (and diaconate), and other such unmentionables. Some things don't change quickly, or perhaps at all, but we continue to cover the stories that matter to the Catholic community.

As long as there is an *NCR*, as long as there are Catholics who support independent Catholic journalism, there will be at least one publication that not only celebrates the church's many successes, but gives equal time to highlighting its controversies and scandals. We do this with affection, with love. But powerful institutions in our society require watchdogs. That's how we, reporters and editors, serve the people of God.

On one level, it's complicated. You can twist yourself in knots considering how a particular story is going to "help" or "hurt" the church. Or you can just tell the stories and let the chips fall as they will. We prefer the latter approach.

It's a style -- independent Catholic journalism practiced by professional laypersons -- that has proven effective for nearly half a century. **Go here**, right now, to show your support.

H.L. Menken, no saint and no friend of religion, said one of the jobs of a journalist is "to afflict the comfortable and comfort the afflicted." That's not all we do, but it's a pretty good start.

And with your continued support, it's what we will continue to do -- in print, online and through whatever new media develops over the coming decades.

[Joe Feuerherd is *NCR* publisher and editor in chief.]

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