



**D**ear Father Kerper: Some of my Catholic friends tell me disturbing things about Pope Francis, other bishops, and the way the Church operates. They always cite Catholic blogs, news agencies, and publications. I never know what to believe. How can I know which of these sources are really Catholic?

Thanks so much for your great and timely question. Almost every day I speak with good people like yourself who become baffled and anxious as they read news stories and opinions from various Catholic sources. Let's unpack the vast jungle of Catholic media by sorting them into three basic categories.

**Church-sponsored media**

Today, more than 130 dioceses publish magazines and newspapers throughout the country, including *Parable*, the official magazine of the Diocese of Manchester. Additionally, many Catholics get their news from parish websites and bulletins. Many dioceses also use Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and other social media. Some larger dioceses even operate broadcast media – such as the Boston-based CatholicTV.

While the Catholic Church in the United States does not have a national publication or television network of its own, the U.S. bishops in 1920 founded the Catholic News Service. CNS continues to serve as a wire service that provides “ready to

print” articles on Church-related matters. Its primary subscribers are Church-sponsored magazines and newspapers.

These official Church publications generally reflect the true and accurate position of the Catholic Church on a whole range of issues. Church-sponsored media, however, differ fundamentally from news organizations in that they don't publish investigative work or debates about settled doctrine. Many major news outlets have journalists who routinely cover religious issues and eagerly handle them, usually in a fair and professional manner.

**Media of Orders and Movements**

The Church contains a great variety of religious orders, lay movements, fraternal orders and specialized groups. These groups often have their own publications and websites that promote their differing forms of spirituality, such as Jesuit, Franciscan and so on. In addition to internal news, these media will sometimes offer the group's specific “reading” of Church and secular events and provide platforms for dialogue on contested matters.

Within this group we also find academic publications such as *Theological Studies*, sponsored by the Jesuits; *Catholic Biblical Quarterly*; and specialized journals. These entities exist within the Church, but also enjoy a wide range of freedom. In light of this, not every published page will conform perfectly to Catholic teaching.

**Independently-owned Media**

We now turn to the third sector: the growing, diversified, volatile, and mostly-independent network of media outlets that operate across multiple platforms from cable television, online, print and radio.

Perhaps the most influential of these independently-owned sources of Catholic-themed media today is the Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN) Global Catholic Network Inc. Indeed, EWTN describes itself as the world's largest religious media network, reaching more than 260 million households. Besides its television and radio holdings and main website, EWTN owns the *National Catholic Register* and offers free, online content to Catholic dioceses, parishes and websites through its Catholic News Agency (not to be confused with the Catholic News Service operated by the U.S. bishops).

The phenomenon of independent Catholic media is not new. For well over 100 years, U.S. Catholics benefited immensely from independent newspapers that presented and defended very different visions of how the Church should operate, teach and relate to American society. The best-known survivors are the *Wanderer*, *National Catholic Register*, *National Catholic Reporter* and *Commonweal*.

These venerable publications retain their original flavors, styles and views on Catholicism. But all of them, at least in their print forms, now dwell in the shadow of the predominant “new media.”

Two qualities radically distinguish the “new” from the “old” media: the hyper-abundance of instantaneous information via the internet; and commercialization.

**Information overload**

As everyone knows, the internet vastly increased and facilitated the rapid distribution of all types of information, including Church-related news, much of it “hot,”

meaning not fully verified or accurately understood.

Because of this, Catholics now instantly hear about things previously unknown. For example, we now hear about the Vatican's delicate diplomacy with China, low-level staff changes at the Vatican, banking scandals and lurid parties in Rome. This hyper-abundance of news and gossip then needs interpretation, which bloggers and others quickly provide, eventually forming factions, each with its own distinctive vision of Church life.

**Commercialization**

Operating blogs and websites obviously costs money. Hence, independent Catholic blogs and websites must generate income. They derive revenue from four sources: on-line advertising; fees for “premium” memberships; free-will donations; and the sale of books and religious articles.

Unlike Church-sponsored media, the independent sector benefits and profits from continual Church-related “emergencies,” conflicts and anxieties. Indeed, some websites are on permanent war-footing.

**Information and spirituality**

As a result of all this, faithful Catholics today have an excess of “inside information” and partisan interpretations.

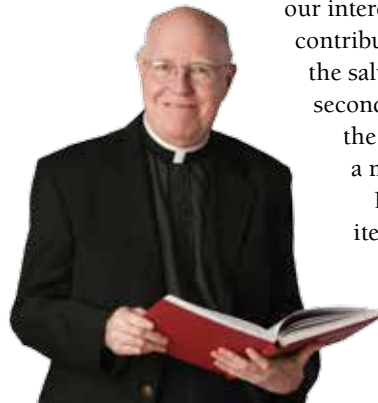
Here's the problem: Unlike all other institutions, the Church — the living body of Christ — is primarily a *spiritual reality* that also has a visible institutional framework. However, the immense powers of technology and standard journalistic practices are necessarily *ordered toward the visible*, bypassing much of the spiritual.

This built-in and unavoidable orientation of the “new media” toward the “institutional Church” distorts the eyesight of the baptized faithful, training them to gaze upon the broken shell rather than the Church's essence, the body of Christ.

Almost 100 years ago, Father Adolphe Tanquerey, the author of many revered seminary manuals, warned against the kind of “unwholesome and vain curiosity,” which today drives much online traffic and captivates viewers and listeners.

In 1923, Father Adolphe told his seminarians: “No doubt, present-day events as well as those of the past may and ought to engage our interest, yet only in so far they contribute to the glory of God and the salvation of men . . . All else is secondary and should not be made the subject of our study, save as a means of leading us to God.”

Before visiting our favorite blogs, social media and websites, perhaps we should always re-read Fr. Tanquerey's wise words. And upon logging off, we should check our souls — for anxiety or peace. ■



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Bro. Titus Phelan, O.S.B. (right), and Bro. Dunstan Enzor, O.S.B. (left), take vows as Benedictine monks. Pictured here with Abbot Mark Cooper, O.S.B.

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