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From intern to publisher

Joe Feuerherd | Sep. 28, 2008

Twenty-four years ago, as a Catholic University of America junior, I began what has become the longest and most fulfilling professional association of my career. As an *NCR* Washington intern, I made the coffee, sorted mail, answered phones, clipped newspapers -- and grabbed whatever reporting assignments I could finagle.

I'd been raised in a journalistic tradition -- my grandfather city editor of the New York *Sun*, two brothers in the business, and reading *NCR* (and *The New York Times*, the *New York Post*, the New York *Daily News* and *Newsday*) since my early teens. Still, it came as a revelation that a future could be made interviewing cardinals and members of Congress, peace activists and conservative supporters of the contras, mandatory celibacy opponents and Latin Mass advocates. In January 1985, I got a bump up to political affairs reporter (at the princely pay of $100 a week) and spent more time writing and reporting for *NCR* than on my history studies. (Most of my professors, however, were reading my *NCR* copy, resulting in some generous grading.)

I came and went. First to Capitol Hill as a congressional press secretary and legislative assistant, then to editor of a weekly publication (the Economic Opportunity Report) focused on federal anti-poverty initiatives, then back to *NCR* (1988-91) as Washington bureau chief. Other stops intervened. I was public affairs officer at the Montgomery County Housing Opportunities Commission (1991-1997), editorial director and associate publisher at United Communications Group (1998-2002), and then back to *NCR* as Washington correspondent (2002-2007).

Now I return again to *NCR*, this time as publisher and editor in chief.

My experiences have given me a deep appreciation and profound respect for the role *NCR* plays in the church. I am among those who have looked to it for news and guidance as we try to sort out the essential from the incidental in our culture and religious tradition.

How do I see that role today? At the risk of invoking a cliché, I believe the American Catholic church is at a critical juncture. *The Emerging Catholic Layman* that *NCR* publisher Don Thorman wrote of four decades ago has, in fact, emerged. The title has not stood the test of time, but the thesis has. The laity is active in parishes, dioceses and church-managed institutions at every level. These 60 million-plus Catholics are experiencing unprecedented political and societal influence. Five of the Supreme Court's nine justices are Catholic, as is the speaker of the House, the last Democratic nominee for president, eight of the 20 leading 2008 presidential candidates of both parties, and 30 percent of the U.S. Congress. Meanwhile, highly educated, active and increasingly affluent Catholics are at the top of their professions in the business world, the sciences, academia, the nonprofit sector and the arts.

We are also at a moment when the U.S. church continues to confront both the effects and aftereffects of the single largest scandal -- the clergy sex abuse crisis -- to ever hit it. Looming on the horizon: increased scrutiny of church financial and management practices as a result of the abuse crisis (diocesan bankruptcies and settlements) and the application of higher standards and disclosure requirements to nonprofit institutions.

Here's what I firmly believe: An independent publication -- both print and Internet-based -- that focuses relentlessly on news and analysis that active Catholics need to be informed about their church and its place and actions within the broader American culture will, properly nurtured, continue to find its audience. To not only survive, but to thrive.

Joe Feuerherd was named NCR *publisher and editor in chief Sept. 15*.

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