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EWTN acquires National Catholic Register

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IRONDALE, Ala. -- The Eternal Word Television Network, based in Irondale, has signed a letter of intent to acquire the National Catholic Register, which describes itself as "the nation's leading Catholic newspaper."

Effective Feb. 1, EWTN will take full control and ownership of the Register, now based in Irondale. Its editorial and business offices had been based in North Haven, Conn., since 1995, when the Legionaries of Christ bought the paper and moved it to New England from California.

"I am very pleased and excited that the Register will now be a part of the EWTN family," said Michael P. Warsaw, EWTN's president and chief executive officer. "All of us at EWTN have great respect for the Register and the role it has played throughout its history. It's a tremendous legacy that deserves to not only be preserved, but also to grow and to flourish."

"I believe that EWTN will be able to provide the stability that the Register needs at this time as well as to give it a platform for its growth in the years ahead. We're proud to be able to step in and carry on both the Register's name and its tradition of faithful Catholic reporting on the issues of the day," noted Warsaw in a Jan. 19 statement.

Under the terms of the transaction, no cash will be exchanged between the parties. EWTN, a global Catholic network, will take over the ongoing operational expenses of the Register and will assume the paper's future subscription liabilities.

The National Catholic Register grew out of the Denver Catholic Register, launched Aug. 11, 1905. Under the leadership of Msgr. Matthew Smith, the Register system of newspapers was developed, with the first national edition appearing Nov. 8, 1927.

In the inaugural issue, Msgr. Smith wrote: "If you like a Catholic paper with snap, vigor, courage, here it is. If you like one that is easy to read, here it is. If you like one that will always be loyal to the church and has no selfish axe to grind, here it is."

The Register system eventually produced 35 diocesan editions, reaching its high point in the 1950s with a combined national and diocesan circulation of more than 700,000.

In 1970, California businessman Patrick Frawley purchased the Register, which was on the decline at that point, and moved it to Los Angeles. In 1995, the Legionaries of Christ and other investors saved the newspaper from closing and moved it to New England.

According to a story in the National Catholic Register by senior writer Tim Drake, the need for EWTN's "providential intervention" was precipitated by what Father Owen Kearns, a Legionaries of Christ priest who is the Register's publisher and editor in chief, described as a "perfect storm," intensified by rising publishing and mailing costs, and the negative impact on Register donations from the downturn in the economy.

All of those factors overwhelmed the Legionaries' ability to continue to subsidize the costs of producing the newspaper and managing its website, Drake wrote.

Also affecting the operation of the paper in part was the fallout from revelations in 2010 that the Legionaries of Christ founder, the late Mexican Father Marcial Maciel Degollado, had fathered children and sexually abused seminarians. After a Vatican investigation, the pope named a delegate to run the order, who predicted the reform may take several years to complete.

As a result of the revelations, the order did not have the resources to bring the previous turnaround efforts to fruition, said Father Kearns.

Recent management changes have saved more than $1 million annually. Senior Register staff told Drake that the reductions, coupled with continued donor support, a new marketing and advertising team, and additional changes have resulted in a recovery that promises to be timely and beneficial to the change in ownership.

According to an EWTN news release, the acquisition of the Register -- first considered in November -- is the latest in the network's efforts to expand its news presence in the global Catholic digital and multimedia market, which currently includes more than 140 countries and territories.

The network has nine television channels with programming in several languages and operates multiple radio services, including a network of hundreds of AM and FM stations, a Sirius satellite radio channel, and a global shortwave radio service

At the start of 2010, EWTN entered into a partnership with the Catholic News Agency, a Denver-based independent Catholic news media outlet with bureaus in North and South America and Europe.

EWTN and CNA share news resources and have created a joint news service. Its Spanish-language news service, EWTN Noticias, was launched at the beginning of this year.

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