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Publishing company a game-changer in the world of Catholic news

Dan Morris-Young | Jun. 17, 2014

Some call it the wave of the future. Others see a tsunami in progress. But there is little doubt that FAITH Catholic Publishing is having a game-changing impact on the U.S. diocesan press.

In 2000, FAITH (not an acronym) was the name given to an embryonic publication for the Lansing, Mich., diocese, a magazine that would be mailed free to all Catholic households there 10 times per year.

A former seminarian with an advertising and graphics background as well as a then-untapped instinct for business and ministry was put in charge.

Today, that Patrick M. O'Brien is president and CEO of what has expanded into FAITH Catholic Publishing and Communications, a venture that collaborates in the creation, printing and mailing of publications serving 28 dioceses and archdioceses, plus a handful of religious communities, national organizations and Catholic colleges.

In addition, the organization oversees 32 digital publications and 22 websites. It offers augmentative products, such as homily helpers, books, prayer cards, funeral items, sacrament certificates and parish placemats. Its annual revenues are approaching $7 million.

As O'Brien and FAITH promotional materials point out, one in five American Catholics who receive a diocesan publication today are holding a product created in collaboration with FAITH. Magazines only made up about 3 percent of the U.S. diocesan market a decade ago.

Total readership of FAITH diocesan periodicals now tops 1 million, well over the 700,000 readership of the nearly three dozen diocesan newspapers that were part of the Denver-based *National Catholic Register* chain of Catholic newspapers at its zenith in the 1950s.

Then one can add another 300,000-plus circulation for FAITH's other print periodicals.

Our Sunday Visitor Publishing also collaborated with several diocesan publications in the years after the *Register* chain's high-water mark.

Readership of Catholic print publications in the U.S. has actually increased in recent years, something for which FAITH should take significant credit, researchers indicate.

Many praise what FAITH has done with its vibrant, attractive, full-color magazines, its emphasis on personal faith stories, and its social media savvy.

Others fear that abandoning news-focused publications in favor of slick magazines delivered only six to 12 times a year leaves parishioners underserved and the church at the mercy of secular news outlets.

Catholic Press Association executive director Tim Walter summarized, "There are those who appreciate the FAITH format as an evangelization tool, and others who feel it does not provide enough diocesan news

coverage. Some dioceses ... have both a newspaper and a FAITH magazine to cover both bases. Understandably, most newspaper people want to remain in the field of their choice. FAITH sees another approach."

O'Brien synthesized that approach when asked about his March visit to Germany, invited there by "an agency of the German bishops" to be a speaker at a two-day conference for Catholic editors and publishers.

"Except for one diocese, all the German dioceses that publish produce a newspaper. I shared our ideas about the need to reach all Catholics with a free membership magazine," O'Brien wrote in an email. "I shared our research that shows how effective magazine media can be in terms of evangelization and I explained how our company serves dioceses. I also met with communications staff at the bishops' conference to share these ideas.

"Several of our ideas beyond magazine vs. newspaper were new to them such as: evangelization focus vs. news focus; free membership model vs. paid subscription; content objectives designed to assist the bishop with his priorities vs. independent journalism; unified branding and open access to content across platforms vs. separate platforms and brands for a diocese and its publication."

'Gleaming' comments

From *Northwest Catholic* magazine in Seattle to *The Catholic Compass* magazine in Pensacola-Tallahassee, Fla., FAITH brand magazines have replaced a number of long-standing Catholic newspapers (*The Catholic Northwest Progress* and *Catholic Compass*, in these two cases).

Seattle is a somewhat typical scenario. The century-old, subscription-based *Progress* was reaching just more than 7,000 subscribers in an archdiocese of 579,500 registered Catholics. Last August, the archdiocese discontinued the newspaper and announced the launch of *Northwest Catholic*. The Spanish- and English-language magazine is mailed free to all registered households (roughly 125,000) 10 times per year.

A digital version is available as a "flipbook" at **NWCatholic.org** [1], the online news site for the archdiocese, and it can be also accessed on tablets through the *Northwest Catholic* app. All of these were developed with the aid of FAITH.

The archdiocese simultaneously pledged to beef up social media and Web-based reports on breaking news and time-sensitive information.

Seattle communications director and *Northwest Catholic* editor Greg Magnoni said the magazine "has been the most overwhelming success that we could have anticipated. Comments are 100 to one positive, gleaming."

"People are receiving it so gratefully, and every month we hear how much they enjoy it, how much they appreciate learning about their faith, about how they share the magazine."

While Seattle leaned on FAITH Publishing to set its magazine in motion, the archdiocese has phased out of its relationship with FAITH and will be producing the magazine totally on its own, effective in June, Magnoni said.

Versions of that "new communications initiative," as Seattle described it, have popped up across the country -- a broadly distributed magazine as a centerpiece surrounded by communication outreach via social media and online presence.

FAITH Catholic appears to be a -- if not the -- driving force behind that.

"We assist our clients on the business side of their publishing media efforts by offering guidance and best practices with distribution, database management, advertising sales, marketing, readership surveys, digital

strategies, subscriptions or reader appeals and ideas on how to retain internal funding and support," O'Brien told NCR in a lengthy email interview. "All this is a particular area of focus for me."

FAITH's flexibility with individual magazines draws accolades. Client magazines have total control of their content, O'Brien underscores. At the same time, they may tap FAITH's reservoir of writers, columns, features and special reports.

"In most instances," the 43-year-old executive pointed out, "the client is operating the publication as a part of the communications or development office. These folks have a lot of hats to wear. They may or may not have experience in publishing, but they have the responsibility. Everyone has a different set of circumstances making each operation unique. So, clients tend to appreciate the operational assistance we provide."

That assistance includes graphic design, content procurement, photography, editing, organization and coordination.

Clients such as Peggy DeKeyser unabashedly applaud FAITH's "extremely talented individuals who come together as a real faith-filled team with what is probably the best customer service I have ever experienced. I don't think I have ever asked for anything and been told no."

Director of communications for the Pensacola-Tallahassee diocese, DeKeyser oversaw the 2009 transition from the diocese's long-established *Catholic Compass* newspaper to the 10-issues-per-year *Catholic Compass* magazine.

The magazine has generated "very positive readership survey results," she said.

"I don't step out of my office when someone doesn't say, 'I love this story' or remarks on an article. I am not sure that was ever the case with the newspaper," said DeKeyser, who was the newspaper's editor and is now editor of the 20,000-circulation magazine.

"I would be up the creek without a paddle without their support and friendship," she said.

Home on the range

FAITH provides the paddle, the creek and an enticing turnkey vessel for bishops, communications offices and development directors. FAITH supporters and detractors agree on that.

"In a couple of places, some bishops had asked their editors time and again to fix things, and they didn't," said a Catholic press veteran who asked to be unnamed. "Patrick O'Brien shows up with a slick solution, and they go for it."

Similar observations come from Bob Zyskowski, who oversees the publication of three dioceses' newspapers under the auspices of the of St. Paul-Minneapolis archdiocese -- Duluth and St. Cloud in Minnesota, and Fargo, N.D.

"In taking over the print publications of some dioceses, FAITH Publishing improved the way the diocese communicates with the faithful. I think that can be said for one reason: FAITH replaced some weak newspapers. Even what I consider the pabulum content that FAITH provides its network is better than what those dioceses were putting out. It's at least more attractive with modern graphic design," said Zyskowski, the 2006-2008 Catholic Press Association president.

FAITH "also replaced good Catholic newspapers," he said. "The need for a change was purported to be to make the diocesan publication more of a catechetical tool -- as if diocesan papers hadn't been doing that for a

century -- when my impression is that the goal was to have their diocesan publications not cause any waves, or because there was a desire to make a personnel change," said Zyskowski.

A former editor and associate publisher of the St. Paul-Minneapolis *The Catholic Spirit* newspaper, Zyskowski received the Catholic Press Association's 2011 St. Francis de Sales Award, in part for "his ability to understand the big picture" and insights into "changing the way the Catholic press must do business if it is to fulfill its mission in the future."

He warns against homogenized, milquetoast content. "I call it the 'Home on the Range' approach to Catholic journalism, where never is heard a discouraging word."

"We've gone through -- and are still in -- an era when some of our church leadership is in a batten-down-the-hatches mode, unwilling to acknowledge that differing opinions are allowable on issues that Catholics care about." He'd like those leaders to see that "the walls of the church won't come crumbling down if the diocesan newspaper prints the fact that some good Catholics have a differing opinion on those issues."

Zyskowski listed content from a recent issue of a FAITH publication:

- A column headlined "My two employees don't like each other. What should I do?"
- A parenting column on "I want to find the child I gave up for adoption."
- A "pro-con column in which the husband and wife discuss whether or not an adult son should continue to be allowed to live back home."
- A "recipe for cooking Brussels sprouts, with a full-page photo of the dish."

"As someone who has made decisions about what to put into and what to leave out of Catholic newspapers for three decades, I don't know how I could ever make the decision to leave out a serious news story or even a feel-good human interest feature story so that I could use a full page for a recipe," he said.

"But if you want to pretend that if you don't put anything controversial in your Catholic publication, the people in the pews won't know about it, won't talk about, won't come to an opinion different from the bishop's, you give them FAITH magazine. And I think that's what FAITH Publishing offers -- nonthreatening content."

FAITH-associated magazine editors, however, bristle a bit at charges of mild-mannered subject matter.

Julie Sly is the editor of *Catholic Herald* magazine in the Sacramento, Calif., diocese and has as many years in the Catholic press business as Zyskowski. She points out that the publication has covered a wide range of salient issues, but "not necessarily in a straight news format."

She cited a litany of topics covered in the six-times-per-year magazine, including immigration, the Philippine typhoon, the experience of military veterans, ethnic diversity, the environment and living with HIV/AIDS.

"Even though we don't really do world news and analysis in the magazine, we do try to present things in a very informed manner through the lens of personal faith stories," she explained. "And we always include links" to documents on church teaching, background reports, germane news coverage, among other resources.

"It is a pretty comprehensive approach" especially when combined with the use of social media and the Web when immediacy is important, said Sly.

A seasoned, hard-news journalist who was editor of *The Catholic Herald* newspaper when it was supplanted by the magazine four years ago, Sly admits she has "become a total convert" to the FAITH Catholic Publishing model.

Like DeKeyser, Magnoni and others, she has been impressed with the degree of "reader enthusiasm" generated and she endorses O'Brien's rallying cry, "content evangelization."

"Every day I have people suggest stories to me," Sly said. "We have carried a wide range of stories on people living out their faith, and I am personally really inspired by these people -- seeing how faith has been tested and lived out."

The Sacramento FAITH operation is unique in that Sly is an employee of the Lansing operation, and she quips about being FAITH's West Coast office.

Inspiration over information

Sly, DeKeyser, O'Brien and others emphasize that the magazines focus on inspiration and motivation over information.

"A diocesan newspaper with an emphasis on information over inspiration can't claim an old model is part of the New Evangelization. A sudden claim to being part of the New Evangelization, but with the same old product, can ring hollow," O'Brien wrote in *FAITH Catholic Publisher*, his organization's trade journal, which is undergoing a name change to *Content Evangelist*.

"I argue that in order for someone to care about news from a Catholic perspective, they first have to care about being Catholic," O'Brien told *NCR*. "That is the primary difference in mission with our approach vs. that of diocesan newspapers."

"Our approach," he added, "is about more than full color on glossy paper. It's about creating a publication that strengthens membership. We model our diocesan magazines after university alumni magazines or association magazines. A diocesan newspaper models itself after a secular, city newspaper."

"We encourage an editorial emphasis on witness stories and columns that help people relate their faith to everyday life," O'Brien explained. "News and information is important. For us, it just comes second. The Gospels do not report news. They share one story after another about an encounter with the Lord -- a woman at the well, a tax collector, a fisherman. So, we tell today's stories about the people in each diocese who have been changed by encountering the Lord."

Recipients appreciate that, according to research provided to client magazines as one of FAITH's services.

"People see the magazine and want to pick it up," said Sly. She cited a recent study of the Sacramento magazine that shows that "71 percent spend more than 15 minutes with each issue."

Chris Gunty would point out that is 15 minutes with the publication every 60 days or so.

"You have to touch people more than every other month," underscored Gunty, associate publisher and editor of the *Catholic Review* biweekly newspaper in Baltimore as well as CEO of Catholic Review Media. "That would not work for our archbishop or our strategic communications plan. You have to ask what you lose when you decrease frequency."

On weeks that the *Review* is not mailed, a bulletin insert is provided to parishes, noted Gunty, a former Catholic

Press Association president and St. Francis de Sales recipient. "We have two models -- one that is mailed into the home, and one delivered to the parishes. The archbishop has a column available to the people every week."

Like others, Gunty underscored the importance of what he calls "intensely good and intensely local publications" which can provide timely reporting and information. That can be lost, he said, in a "cookie-cutter" approach.

Local factors

How much local content a FAITH-associated magazine runs depends on a diocese's resources and communications focus.

In Sacramento, for example, Sly reports that "about 80 percent" of the content is local, created by herself and a $1,500 per edition freelance budget. The magazine also uses some FAITH columnists.

By contrast, the neighboring Santa Rosa diocese's FAITH magazine has been predominantly copy generated by FAITH headquarters, until recently, when a new communications director took over. Brian O'Neel told NCR that the current version of the Santa Rosa magazine is "all local."

That said, it will also be the last Santa Rosa FAITH magazine. O'Neel explained that the diocese is leaving the FAITH camp to re-establish a newspaper, scheduled to begin as a monthly and increase frequency in the future.

"The biggest challenge has been the long time it takes to turn around an issue," said O'Neel of the FAITH magazine process. "It's published one month after we submit the articles. This makes giving readers anything timely very difficult. Also, given the costs, it is not easy/cost-effective to increase the space one has dedicated to news. There's constantly the challenge of deciding which of your children you want to throw out of the boat, so to speak."

Other factors in the decision, O'Neel said, included "the reduced cost of going to newsprint, the all-around flexibility it affords us, and the ability to work with local vendors."

While a monthly newspaper will not be highly timely, it will be significantly more so than the monthly magazine, he said.

O'Neel lauds FAITH personnel, however. One of his primary contacts in Lansing "knows how to answer all my questions, even if he has to research it and get back to me," O'Neel said, and the design artist with whom he has worked "is worth about 10 times whatever they are paying her."

"Look at what she did with our May issue. When I saw the PDF, I was stunned. It's breathtaking. I gave her raw materials, some notes, and she just went with it."

"I do appreciate FAITH's professionalism, and their canned content is the sort of thing I hope I can find elsewhere. ... They should keep it up. I just have some different ideas, however, which is another reason we're moving in the direction we are," O'Neel said.

One archdiocese to the south, San Francisco, seems close to fulfilling Gunty's exhortation of "intensely good and intensely local" with its almost-weekly *Catholic San Francisco* newspaper (33 printed editions plus eight digital-only issues).

Like several FAITH magazines, the newspaper is mailed to all registered households.

Catholic San Francisco was founded by then-Archbishop William Levada in 1999 after the archdiocese had

experimented with a magazine (*San Francisco Catholic*) after its longtime newspaper, *The Monitor*, was terminated in 1984, largely for weak circulation numbers.

"Long deadlines and too much canned national material make the FAITH model less valuable for people in the pews than a financially secure diocesan paper with at least a twice-monthly schedule, in my opinion," said Rick DelVecchio, Catholic San Francisco editor and general manager.

"Also, I don't see strong benefits for any party, from the bishop on down, for outsourcing the core social communications tool at a time when news is coming in a constant rush and the voice of the church needs to break through. As part of a downsizing of chancery staff it might be an option and I gather this had been done," DelVecchio added.

FAITH promotion

How FAITH gains clients makes for interesting conversation. Bob Lockwood distilled what other Catholic press associates also said: "They promote heavily to all bishops, not just bishops who have killed or are about to kill their newspapers, or have no newspaper."

Lockwood recently retired after 42 years in Catholic communications including 28 years with *Our Sunday Visitor* national newspaper and publishing. Some years ago, *Our Sunday Visitor* collaborated with several dioceses in the publication of their newspapers. The FAITH approach, said Lockwood, "is not the OSV model, which never planned to put people out of work. The OSV model was to help a diocese create a diocesan newspaper where none had existed."

FAITH's O'Brien countered, "I think there is some misunderstanding about what we are about and our role in the changes in the diocesan press, in particular. It is not surprising that some diocesan newspaper editors say they are wary of FAITH Catholic. Every time they see one of our magazines replace a diocesan newspaper, they view it as the loss of jobs, a reduction in frequency and dismissal of 'hard news.'

"What I see instead," O'Brien continued, "is that we help dioceses continue to publish. The decline of diocesan newspapers is not because of FAITH Catholic. It is tied to the declines in the overall newspaper business model and changing readership habits of the public. Magazine media have been more resilient. FAITH Catholic saves jobs that otherwise would be gone. We grow Catholic publishing in an age when print is in decline. Both the number of dioceses that publish and the number of people who now get a publication from their diocese have grown because of FAITH Catholic.

"Prior to FAITH Catholic, dioceses had not experienced being presented with an alternate publishing solution. Therefore, some see our marketing as predatory. However, it should come as no surprise that we would communicate with diocesan leaders just like all the other businesses that offer services to dioceses, such as religious education textbook publishers, seminaries, software companies, etc. We serve more communications directors and editors than any other publishing company."

At the same time, O'Brien told *NCR*, "We don't have a dedicated sales force with goals or quotas. ... We are approached by bishops, chancellors, finance officers and communications professionals. It varies. We have even been approached by pastors and parishioners. Most new clients are the ones to initiate contact. At some point, they may have seen our materials or a client magazine."

Some in the Catholic press describe FAITH's marketing efforts in more robust terms, closer to bumper cars than pony rides. According to one, "It is patently false that FAITH only goes where they are invited. I cannot tell you the number of times I get a packet from them, and they also market heavily at bishops' gatherings."

O'Brien clearly stated that one of FAITH's underlying principles is to support a bishop-publisher's vision: "I advocate that the mission of the publisher is the mission of the publication. The Catholic press, specifically the diocesan press, tends to focus on news from a Catholic perspective and values journalistic independence. But with FAITH Catholic, clients know our goal is to get their message out, not our own. This gets back to mission. For us, the mission is evangelization over news."

Abandoning the news?

A byproduct of FAITH's growing number of diocesan publications that key on timeless features and catechetics is a commensurate decline in emphasis on breaking Catholic news.

Tony Spence, director and editor in chief of the U.S. bishops' news agency, Catholic News Service, knows about that. Has FAITH's growth cut into CNS use and revenues?

"Yes, of course," Spence responded. "At one point almost every diocese had a newspaper, and for the most part all were subscribers."

"The FAITH model is a very different one from legacy newspapers," Spence said. "FAITH is almost exclusively feature-oriented -- profiles, columns, lots of nice photos and graphics, and a bit of catechetics thrown in. What FAITH magazines do lack is a news component, but that is by design."

"My concern remains that dioceses that abandon news reporting and news commentary ... are handing control of the news about the church and the faith to the secular press on a silver platter," Spence said.

"We don't have as many diocesan clients as we did in the golden years -- if CNS ever had golden years -- but we have compensated by adding more international clients and creating new products," he said. "Still, U.S. diocesan clients are our bread and butter. Some diocesan publishers switched to FAITH. Some ceased publishing altogether. In almost every case, the decision was determined by economics."

Asked if the CNS advisory board -- made up mostly of CNS subscribers -- has discussed FAITH and its influence, Spence said, "It is in the conversation of every advisory board meeting, and that is a great compliment to FAITH. The FAITH model challenges everyone to think in new ways about what they are doing and could it be done better."

Noting that FAITH offers "a monthly world and national news report for our magazines that can't afford CNS," O'Brien said he "encourages every client diocese to subscribe to CNS -- at a minimum for their website. We are a customer of CNS, and would love to be able to work with them to ensure all of our clients can get CNS content."

O'Brien stressed, "The best way to look at a magazine solution is as part of a total media package for a diocese -- print, Web, social media and public relations."

As with its proficient and efficient magazine skill set, FAITH offers clients cutting-edge education, counsel, encouragement and equipment to take into the wilderness that is multimedia.

For example, at its recent annual client conference in Lansing, O'Brien and FAITH rolled out "responsive design websites" that work on computers, tablets and smartphones.

However, creating a website -- no matter how responsive -- hardly assures anyone will use it, even if they are aware of it, other Catholic communicators point out.

They concur with O'Brien and ample analytics that point to persons, especially younger ones, increasingly seeking news digitally.

But, as CNS's Spence said, "the internet is not a field of dreams. Just because you build a site doesn't mean people will come and play Catholic baseball. Newspapers and magazines, on the other hand, come directly into people's homes."

Gunty echoes Spence: "We are all looking for answers here, and no one has really nailed it yet. We need to communicate what is authentically" Catholic in as many ways as possible.

[Dan Morris-Young is an *NCR* West Coast correspondent. He was the first editor of *Catholic San Francisco* and has edited diocesan newspapers in Spokane, Wash., and Oakland, Calif., as well as serving as an interim editor in Little Rock, Ark., and Seattle.]

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