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Lay preaching, the bishops and the new evangelization

Phyllis Zagano | Jan. 4, 2012 Just Catholic

Gutenberg started it with his printing press, and the church's ability to control its message has been eroding ever since. Information and delivery systems were once restricted to stole-wearing clerics, but now bishops have the laity's access to the Internet to deal with.

They are not having much luck controlling the new lay preaching.

Not that they don't try. Catechisms and canon law are all about coordinating and managing the message. Bishops can grant and withdraw preaching faculties. Diocesan censors grant -- or refuse to grant -- imprimaturs. But it's a new world. Lay people don't ask permission for Internet preaching, and scholars no longer seek permission to publish.

The bishops' control conundrum intensifies with easier and less expensive social media. Now anyone can start a blog or post a YouTube video, saying whatever about one or another Catholic teaching.

There is not much a bishop can do about it, though he can try.

Some canon laws seem to apply. Canon 216 tries to trademark the word "Catholic," restricting its use to organizations approved by the bishop. Canon 772 gives norms for radio and television commentary on Catholic doctrine. Some canon lawyers say it applies to the Internet.

Recently, the Archdiocese of Detroit invoked C. 216 (but not C. 772), declaring Michael Voris' RealCatholic TV.com [1] -- a conservative Internet broadcast out of Ferndale, Mich. -- could not call its activities "Catholic."

Voris says Marc Brammer of South Bend, Ind. -- not Voris -- owns the broadcast's name. Fort Wayne-South Bend Bishop Kevin Rhoades has stayed out of it so far. (Coincidentally, when in Harrisburg, Rhodes convinced another layman, Robert Sungenis, to rename his "Catholic Apologetics International." It is now called "The Bellarmine Report.")

As it happens, the Fort Wayne-South Bend folks say Voris and Brammer went to them with their Internet broadcast idea in pre-Rhoades days. The two were ignored.

Moral of the story: There may have been an opportunity to bring "RealCatholic.TV," which sometimes garners more than 50,000 viewers, into the bishop's purview. Now the claim is "it's not real, it's not Catholic and it's not TV."

Maybe so, but it's out there side-by-side with solid journalism, fascinating theological speculation and the half-baked doctrinal musings of all manner of info-geeks right, left and centrist.

Have the bishops lost control? In a word, yes. But did they ever have it?

As the story goes, when the archbishop of New York demanded Dorothy Day drop "Catholic" from The Catholic Worker, she said she could cross the Brooklyn Bridge and find people the bishop of Brooklyn would like her to help. The problem -- and the archbishop -- went away.

Day's penny-a-copy newspaper is different from Internet broadcasts freely accessed worldwide, but it was (and is) like so many other publications -- including this one -- interested in things Catholic and staffed predominantly, if not exclusively, by Catholics.

Must "Catholic" always equal clerically approved and controlled? Does clerical control help or hurt?

I think the problem -- for the bishops -- is they are so suspect that average Catholics of whatever leaning are wary of anything they say. Matters get complicated when a non-cleric is upbraided for publishing something -- witness the ongoing saga of Elizabeth Johnson [2] -- and that could be why most bishops look the other way when new media voices stir a pot here or there.

Of course, many U.S. bishops' desktop lists are topped by parishes (some closing), priests (a few jailed) and donors (many angry). Information control is probably is the last thing on their minds. Yet as the mitered influence of individual bishops and of the hierarchy as a whole fades, tabloid-style blogs and websites -- some, quite frankly, irresponsible -- overtake the message. And increasing numbers of dioceses are frozen in an ermine-trimmed past of rings and trains, waking up only when control of the message is wholly lost.

It does not need to be this way.

The necessary détente is about lay preaching. Formal lay preaching is a nonstarter -- canon law refuses bishops permission to allow homilies by lay persons at Masses -- but there are many other things a bishop can do, beginning with supporting creative preaching and responsible scholarship by the whole church.

We've heard about the "new evangelization." If not this, then what is it about?

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