



Newspapers in Christian Life

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Surely the Catholic layman, working hard to restore all things in Christ in the marketplace where he works, snatching precious minutes for prayer and meditation, spiritual reading, and, hopefully, daily Mass, giving much of his attention to the needs of his family, taking needed recreation, does not have time to waste reading the newspaper. Doesn't he learn the news of the day from radio and television? Radio stations are like newspapers of the air, and in the morning the busy man can watch the "Today" show, which considers itself "a kind of national, daily newspaper." It would seem that the active man of affairs has no need of the newspaper.

What of the retired man, the man of leisure? He has time, but does he want to spend it keeping up with the events which are so quickly forgotten? Henry David Thoreau, in his cottage near Walden Pond, was sure that he had never read any memorable news in a newspaper. "To a philosopher," he wrote, "all *news*, as it is called, is gossip, and they who edit and read it are old women over their tea." Perhaps to the Christian, who compares all his reading with the sublimity of his Scriptures, the record of passing things is of even less interest, for his mind yearns to contemplate the heavenly truths which are the cause of his joy.

Yes, but the Christian *does* read his newspaper. He reads it, but often feels guilty about the time he spends on it; his wife makes comments about his preoccupation with items which seem only trivial to her. Perhaps this *is* trivial, he thinks. "I must do more serious reading," is an occasional resolution, when he catches himself dawdling over the sports pages. What is this cluster of print and maps, of ads and cartoons, that is so attractive, so beguiling? Is it really only a temptation to idle distraction, an inexpensive amusement?

The modern newspaper has tremendous human interest; it can fascinate us. It is full of entertainment, paid for us by the advertisers; the very variety enthralls us. Marshall McLuhan, in his provocative *Understanding Media*, suggests that "it is the daily communal exposure of multiple items in juxtaposition that gives the press its complex dimension of human interest." Is it true that we really enjoy the ads most? They are news, but always *good* news, McLuhan notes. The *real* news is bad news. The collection of disasters, crimes and tragedies that fill page after page makes us participate in a group confession. We are moved to repentance for the sins of man. The mosaic of the world we read at the breakfast table is a terrible challenge to our charity. The oneness of the globe is there before us in visual form: the "inside story"—is it really the "inside" story? Have we sold our time to the advertisers to good purpose? The newspaper can be a great teacher, if we are able to learn from it; otherwise it uses us for its own ends.

We have bought in the daily press a page of history. There are the actions of our human community. A systematic man can form his own volume of contemporary history by clipping articles from the newspaper. Ernest Dimnet, in *The Art of Thinking*, advises us to attack the paper with a red pencil and scissors. A rapid scanning of

the paper enables us to find the important articles, which are marked in red; then these articles are cut out and read carefully. The valuable ones are filed in dossiers. This procedure enables us to think deeply about these reports of history, and assimilate their meaning.

We need not follow this particular procedure, but there must be some way of controlling the vice of curiosity. In moderating our reading we limit ourselves to what is really useful. We want to find the truths that have relevance for our lives. But how to find the truth in the newspaper? Is it easy?

When we have chanced to witness some interesting event, the first thing we look for in the paper is the report of it. The thrill of reading about it is but little disturbed by the many inaccuracies we notice. Just as the medium itself can sway us, so the truth of the message is not so much in the facts as in the judgments that surround them. The real problem in learning from the paper is to be able to evaluate the multitude of prudential judgments which are found in the very selection and relative location of news and in the writing of every story, as well as in the explicit comments of the editorials and the columns.

It has long been a commonplace that the publishers in the United States have had a private interest in the policies of their papers, not in accord with the needs of the common good, and on a level deeper than the bias of political affiliation. The power of the papers as such has decreased with the competition of other media, but it is still a potent tool for those who can put their messages in it. As McLuhan comments, the press agent "regards the newspaper as a ventriloquist does his dummy. He can make it say what he wants." Daniel Boorstin, in *The Image*, has given us "a guide to pseudo-events in America." He catalogues forms of news "making" and the growth of illusion even in reports which appear to be quite factual; it is the wholesale substitution of image for reality. Celebrities crowd out heroes. The rapidity of communication makes instantaneous public opinion a constant pressure on public officials. The power of the press, pictured by Douglass Cater in *The Fourth Branch of Government*, presents an irresistible temptation to manipulation.

Recently Pope Paul VI has reminded us that although a good press "must promote in the reader that process of judgment which introduces him to the liberating and saving truth," much of the press carries on its task "by entering minds not to generate such truth, but

to distort impressions and ideas, and to produce a bond worse than any exterior chains, the bond of error, the bond of spiritual enslavement to mistaken ideas or even simply of servility to the opinions of others."¹ In these circumstances the Christian reader must educate himself to detect the errors insinuated into the daily press and the news weeklies. This self-education depends first on broad training in the historical and sociological studies which combine with the social teachings of the Church to form competence in making prudent political judgments.

Wise reading of the paper also requires the skill of seeing through the journalist's rhetoric—the headlines, the eye-catching anecdotes, the clever use of quotations to present opinions—to the ideas and judgments which are being offered. Often the very meaning of words is lost in these times, and journalists have only the foggiest notion of the force and application of the terms they use. Anti-Christian judgments are quite evident in the current controversial areas of morality, but the running dialogue between the journalist and his Christian reader usually concerns the day by day matters of legislation, social policy and foreign affairs. In these areas the average reader is quite at a loss, for he feels deficient in the expert knowledge so essential to wise decisions. This feeling of estrangement from the activities of government is one of the characteristics of our technological age, and it is rarely confronted so strongly as when we see, in the newspaper, the gap between our range of influence and the operation of the seemingly impersonal forces moving the world. The lack of faith in the newspaper accentuates the feeling of helplessness.

It is easier to detect mistakes than to provide correct solutions, so the Christian's critical reading of the newspaper soon reveals to him the many unsound viewpoints which are conveyed to him along with the information and the entertainment. This mixture of truth and error, however, is not the only thing that becomes evident. What looms in his imagination is the realization of what a wonderful instrument of truth a truly Catholic paper would be! The doubts concerning the justification of his daily ritual of newspaper consultation would vanish, for the Catholic paper would be a true teacher, not an indoctrinator, and not a challenge, testing all his powers of judgment and discrimination.

Pope Paul has stated the need for Catholic papers with great firmness:

"Today the Catholic newspapers is not a superficial luxury or an optional devotion: it is a necessary instrument for the circulation of those ideas which are fed by our Faith, and which in turn render service to our profession of that Faith. It is no longer permissible today to live without having a fund of thought that is continually refurbished and brought up to date with the history which we are living and preparing. It is not possible to have such a fund of thought aligned with Christian principles without the material, the reminders and the stimulus contained in the Catholic newspaper."²

In Europe, where the Holy Father spoke, there are many Catholic daily papers. Are the circumstances here so different that the need is not the same?

In the United States there are many Catholic weekly papers and magazines which give news about Church activities, and some include comments about the leading public events and issues. By dint of much reading, it is possible to acquire a fund of information about religious activities and some related secular ones. But this has been done at the price of the acceptance of the split that has come into the world, the separation of the real world, represented by the worldview of the *New York Times* or the *Washington Post*, and the Christian world which is seen in a fragmented and parochial press. Father Felix Morlion, O.P., in *The Apostolate of Public Opinion* (1944), had outlined the program of a Catholic press service and press, but it has only been the Vatican Council which has brought the presence of the Church before the eyes of the world.

The real issues in the world are truly ecumenical: they concern the whole Church, all Christians, all religious men, all men of good will, all nations. The newspaper presents a mosaic of this world; it alone gives as in a photograph the unity of suffering man, the need for Christian hope for a redeemed mankind. Christ, having been lifted up from the world, draws all things up to himself. How does the world look from the Cross? The Vatican Council has told us how the world is to be seen: The Church, *Lumen Gentium*, lives and acts among men until the end, teaching the truths of God, *Dei Verbum*. Inspired and nourished by the sacred liturgy, marvelously renewed, the faithful labor to serve all men, for "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and anxieties of the followers of Christ." From the Cross, as from Rome, we see bishops, pastors, religious, laity, striving to purify

themselves, to make themselves fitting instruments of the overflowing Divine Goodness.

The grace of God is acting in the world, the world that seems so remote from Him as we see it spread out before us in the pages of the newspaper. What is not there in black type and wirephotos must be supplied by the vision of faith, which sees more than mere men interacting. The papers could report all the activities of synods and missionaries, all the labors of educators and the healers of the sick, all the baptisms and the martyrdoms, without manifesting the Spirit within them. Our true life is hidden in Christ with God, but when we read the "news" we should read with the eyes of the Christ within us. It is for this that we are educated.

The Council has asked each bishop, each Catholic, to concern himself with the needs of the whole Church, the whole world, and to cooperate in advancing the Church's mission. The needs, at least, are displayed in the newspapers, but a world-mosaic without the record of the works of Christian charity has many missing pieces and breeds the despair that burdens so many now. More fundamentally, we despair if we read without knowing the true Good News, the Gospel, which enlightens us even to the meaning of the evil and suffering we cannot turn our eyes away from.

The newspapers must be carriers of the Good News. The Church:

judges it part of her duty to preach the news of redemption with the aid of the instruments of social communication and to instruct mankind as well in their worthy use. Therefore the Church claims as a birthright the use and possession of all instruments of this kind which are necessary or useful for the formation of Christians and for every activity undertaken on behalf of men's salvation."

These words from the Decree on the Instruments of Social Communications should inspire us to carry out "the layman's particular obligation to animate these instruments with a humane and Christian spirit." The first step is for the Christian, while he reads his newspaper, to read with the vision of faith, with hope in God's continual regenerating activity, and with love for all men, especially the most desolate, for God's sake.

NOTES

¹ Pope Paul, Address, May 2, 1964.

² *Ibid.*