



Truth on Our Side

By Emily Stimpson Photos by Matt Seal



Late last fall, when Pope Benedict XVI got a Twitter account of his own (handle: Pontifex), he made one thing clear: If Catholics want to evangelize, they have to be as adept at using the tools of media as they are at catechizing and theologizing.

For Catholics living in the 21st century, there is simply no escaping the media. It's the air we breathe and the sea in which we swim. It informs, shapes, and directs our culture. It is, often quite literally, the prism through which countless souls see our world.

Despite all that, many Catholics have been reluctant to follow the pope's lead, viewing the media more as a hostile foe than a tool that can be used to serve the common good. Following his recent Distinguished Speakers Series talk to students, *Franciscan Way* spoke with former Franciscan student and FOX News religion analyst, Father Jonathan Morris, about how we can overcome both our own fears and the prejudices against Catholics that exist within the media.

FranciscanWay: The mainstream media has a reputation for being liberally biased, hostile to the faith, and ignorant of what the Church teaches. Is that reputation fair or not?

Father Jonathan Morris: Occasionally, you do see some conscious bias among some in the secular press, but mostly, I think it's more a question of religious ignorance. Religion is one of those areas that you can talk about without much knowledge to back up what you say. And so you have a good many people in the media talking about religion without really understanding it.

FW: Why do you think that is? What makes people in the media feel free to talk about religion, knowing so little about it, when they would never do that for, say, foreign policy or economics?

FJM: There is a general perception or belief that because religion is founded on faith and because many people see faith as something that is not objective, but as purely emotional, that any arguments made in reference to faith are completely subjective. The same goes for the people making the arguments. They see a person who is religious as subjective, not objective.

FW: What consequences follow that assumption?

FJM: One of the most serious consequences is that we don't have a media that is taking on religious issues in a serious way. We don't have serious discussions about some of the most important things in the secular press. If there are discussions, they tend to be very superficial, and any religion reporting is done in a haphazard way.

FW: What is the best way for Catholics to change that?

FJM: It starts with the need to take the question more seriously. We need to decide if we're going to be involved in media in a serious and compelling way. In conservative Catholic circles, I often hear more complaint than strategy. Everyone will say the media is liberal and biased, but I don't see much engagement to change that in a strategic way. The truth is, I've found that the secular media is primarily an economic project, a commercial project. Which means that if we can do something in a compelling way—providing the answers people are looking for and finding creative ways to present our point—the media will generally be open to that.

FW: By that do you mean getting more Catholics working in the secular media or creating more of our own content?

FJM: I don't think it's either/or. It's both/and. Too often in the Catholic media we end up preaching to the choir. We reach out to people who already agree with us. There's certainly a place for that. People need encouragement, inspiration, and support. But we have to do a much better job—from the bishops all the way down—engaging the culture and presenting convincing reasons for our beliefs.

FW: What's one practical way we could do that?

FJM: For example, right now, when the bishops make a statement, who covers it? Who talks about it? Not the secular press. At least, not typically. But there are some people that the media will talk to about anything, people who are leaders in their communities and fields. Professional football players, CEOs, actresses—the media wants to get those people in the news because they're people that the culture is already interested in. So, if we build a network of people who are in these leadership positions, both in local communities and on the national scene, then form them as spokesmen for truth, we would get our ideas heard far more frequently. So, when the bishops put out a statement, these leaders could go out and talk about it. Basically, we need better media training for Catholics and for non-Catholics who share our values and beliefs. Again, what I've found through my work with CNN and FOX is that they are interested in what we have to say. We have to get over the fear of thinking of media as the enemy, as the big bad secular media. More than anything else, it is a commercial industry, and if we're giving them good content, they'll use it.

FW: What about when it comes to using the new media? How can we better use social media to our advantage?

FJM: With the new media, every single person can have some influence. Twitter, Facebook, blogs—these are all platforms for Catholics to get our ideas known. It's important, however, that we use those tools in such a way that we're targeting non-Catholics and Catholics who are disenfranchised. We don't need more inside Catholic blogs. We need to be thinking about how we're going to reach people who aren't already connected to the Church. If we're not thinking that way, we shut ourselves out of the conversation. Priests need to be thinking the same thing when we're preparing our homilies. We need to be preaching to people outside the tent, people who might be in the pews with friends or relatives.

FW: How has the Church done when it comes to presenting our position on the religious liberty question?

FJM: For the most part, I think the Church has done a good job on this. I don't think the election results are a consequence of a bad presentation of the facts. It's just that many people don't listen to the bishops anymore. The Church's PR has been fine in this regard. The real problem, the real question, is how are we going to do a better job of evangelizing and catechizing? How do we get people to care?

FW: When we do send people out to present the Church's views in the secular media, what do we need to keep in mind?

FJM: When it comes to television specifically, the person doing the communicating has to be likeable and trusted. You never win an argument just because you presented your point better than the other side. Those points also have to be presented by a likeable person in an interesting way. It has to come across that the person cares about the audience, that he has compassion for those who are listening. If, on the other hand, we're just interested in showing we're right, we turn people off. That's especially true if the person speaking is a clergyman or an official spokesman of the Church. Many people have biases against the Church and the Catholic point of view. If we're not able to break through those prejudices and get them to like us and trust us, we won't be successful no matter what we say.

FW: What advantages do Catholics have on our side when we present our viewpoints in the secular media?

FJM: We have truth. The Church's teachings on social and personal issues, even on political issues, when presented in an interesting and compelling way, resonate with people because they're true. We have to trust that. We need to go in confident that we have a product people want, that we have something the audience needs. And if we present that in a good way, the audience will respond. Really, we have every advantage. We have truth on our side. We have a greater motivation to use the medium. We have a mission to which we've dedicated our entire life. That will count for everything if we use the tools of media well. ■