

The Media Savvy Catholic

Make 2010 the year to stop letting the media tell you how to think!

by Teresa Tomeo



I'll never forget the day after the 2008 election.

Every Wednesday morning on my EWTN radio program *Catholic Connection*, I have the blessing of interviewing Fr. Frank Pavone, the National Director of Priests for Life and the host of the EWTN's weekly *Defending Life* program. Never was I so grateful to have him on the air in the middle of the week as I was that dark November morning when it seemed like the Church and the pro life movement took so many direct hits from the voting results.

Despite the major defeat of many pro-life candidates across the country, Fr. Pavone was his usual optimistic and faith-filled self. He helped me, as well as my listeners, pick ourselves up, brush ourselves off, and start all over again. He reminded us that God was still on His throne and that all was not lost. With a battle cry of "onward Christian soldiers" he encouraged us to look toward 2010 and the congressional races.

Well, here we are in 2010 and another opportunity to make a difference awaits us. But before we head back to the voting booth, we have to do our homework to protect ourselves from being misled by the media spin that was so prevalent the last time we cast our votes.

And no it wasn't your imagination. The media spin and, more specifically, the extreme media bias, were over-the-top the last time around. Numerous studies, including several from the Pew Research Center, showed that the lion's share of the positive political news stories went to liberal candidates. One

Pew survey pointed out that a majority of voters from both major parties believed the media wanted to see the liberal candidates elected and were doing everything they could to get their favorite candidate into office.

So where does that leave the Catholic voter? What does that mean for the Mom, the Dad, the grandparent hoping to bring about a better future for their family by helping to put good and moral men and women into Washington and our state capitol buildings?

Well, since we must always look at everything through the lens of Scripture and the teachings of the Catholic Church, let's turn to another one of my favorite Catholic teachers - the Most Reverend Charles J. Chaput, Archbishop of Denver, Colorado.

Archbishop Chaput does a great deal of writing and speaking on cultural issues including the news media. Last year he participated in a media conference and panel discussion for the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life. His presentation, "*Catholics and the Fourth Estate*," is a must have for any one interested in understanding how the media operates and how it impacts our opinions and morality. You can find it on the Denver archdiocese web site at www.archden.org.

"America's news media have enormous opinion shaping power. Therefore it is vital for Catholics to understand how the media work, and especially how the media work on us," Chaput said.



Photo by Trisha Niermeyer Potter, www.printsofgrace.com

So how do the media work on us? Well for starters the media want you to believe that their world view is everyone's world view. Surveys dating back to the early 1980's show that a majority of reporters identify themselves as left of center and supporting, among other things, abortion and homosexual rights. In "*Catholics and the Fourth Estate*" the Archbishop cites a 2005 Annenberg Public Policy Center study showing that while 40 percent of Americans attend church services once a week or more - only 17 percent of the news media do.

In a perfect world this shouldn't matter. But as you may have noticed by now, we live in a fallen world.

Unfortunately, over the years the media have succumbed to what's known as "group think." They assume that because the people in their news rooms believe the same things they do, then it must be, or should be, the same for the rest of us.

"The idea that this deep difference in religious practice doesn't flavor our press coverage would be too strange to take seriously," the Archbishop says. "In a sense, we are what we believe. Our convictions shape the way we deal with the world. And that includes media professionals. If employees of ABC gave 80 times more financial support to the Obama presidential campaign than they did to John McCain which is exactly what happened in 2008- it's sensible for the rest of us to have some questions about the fairness of the network's political coverage.

"In like manner, reporters who see religion as a superstition or a backward social force, or a personal idiosyncrasy, or a source of division or violence, will never get the story of religious faith right. They don't have the vocabulary or the experience," Chaput explained.

Speaking from nearly 30 years in the media, with more than 20 of those years spent in secular newsrooms, I can tell you first hand that the media are often rushed for time and have a limited

amount of space when it comes to faith based stories. As a result, a Church teaching may be misquoted or misunderstood and then misrepresented in their reports.

So put down that secular newspaper and pick up the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*! Plug into other orthodox Catholic resources and media outlets such as EWTN, and magazines such as *Canticle* or Catholic Answer's *This Rock*. You can also find numerous reliable Catholic resources on line as well including *Catholic News Agency*

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at www.catholicnewsagency.com and *Zenit News Agency* at www.zenit.org.

And don't forget Catholic newspapers such as *Our Sunday Visitor* and *the National Catholic Register*.

There is no longer any reason for you *not* to know your faith. The *Catechism*, Papal writings, and Church documents are just a few clicks away on the Internet. You can even sign up to receive the free Vatican Information Service updates by visiting www.vatican.va. Or see what the Holy Father is up to by visiting his social networking page at www.pope2you.net

In addition to being aware of the influence of the news media, don't forget that the mass media can have an impact on our belief system. This includes the TV shows we watch, the radio shows we listen to, the web sites we visit, the music we enjoy, or the video games our children play.

Did you know that more than 70 percent of TV programming contains sexual content? Children see at least 100,000 violent acts by the time they are 13 years old. The average age for a child to be exposed to on-line porn is now eight.

It doesn't take a rocket scientist to connect the dots here. You get the picture. There is a connection between what we consume media-wise and how we think and behave.

Consuming too much sexual content as well as viewing too much violent media can desensitize us and slowly cause us to accept ideas or lifestyles contrary to Church teaching. That's why doctors, psychologists, and others who have studied media influence extensively insist that media outlets such as TV's and computers should be in a central area of the home so healthy media habits can be developed and media usage can be monitored.

One of the best family media guides was written by our late Holy Father, John Paul II. His 2004 World Communications Day statement; "*Media and the Family: A Risk and Richness*" is one of my favorite Papal writings and is packed with all kinds of great nuggets for developing a family media awareness and activism plan.

It may take some time and effort, but even just a little bit of work on our part will make us savvy enough to safely navigate the deceptive world of today's media.

Teresa Tomeo is the author of NOISE, and the host of the daily EWTN radio program Catholic Connection.