

Faith, Scholarship, and Catholic News

By Maria R. Mazzenga and Jennifer A. Younger

In the earliest American Catholic newspapers, lead articles were often expositions on the principles of Christian faith. Indeed, publishers often set forth purposes similar to that expressed in 1831 in Cincinnati: “The primary object, in issuing the *Catholic Telegraph*, is to aid in diffusing a correct knowledge of the Roman Catholic faith.” From that starting point, an expansion in scope reflected attention to the spiritual needs, participation, and leadership of Catholic clergy and laity in their Catholic communities and American society.

Today, Catholic colleges and universities approach their Catholicity in a similarly holistic way, bringing together the pursuit of truth with excellence in teaching and research, while also attending to students’ spiritual development. Because students want to learn about religion and from religion as a way of gaining meaning in their lives, Catholic newspapers offer a unique resource on Catholic and religious history. A particularly rich online resource is the [Catholic News Archive](#), hosted by the Catholic Research Resources Alliance (CRRA).

The idea of a Catholic press originates with Catholics’ desire to offer information to one another in a country with a press that, at best, ignored Catholic interests or, at worst, expressed outright hostility toward the Catholic population. Given that, Catholic newspapers of the past offer a window into life as experienced by Catholics in America. Contemporary accounts of Catholic views on Protestantism, support for the nation’s wars, refutations of anti-Catholic diatribes, parish life and civic participation, and more sustained Catholic communities then and provide significant historical narratives for study today.

The availability of multiple newspapers in an aggregated digital Catholic News Archive presents possibilities for teaching and research unavailable even ten years ago. Now, instructors and students have the opportunity to explore the Catholic experience across time. Three university professors recently spoke about innovative uses of newspapers as [source materials in teaching and research](#).

Maria R. Mazzenga is curator of the American Catholic History Research Center and University Archives at The Catholic University of America. Jennifer A. Younger is executive director of the Catholic Research Resources Alliance (CRRA) and Edward H. Arnold Director of Libraries Emerita, University of Notre Dame.



The front page of the San Francisco *Monitor* from 1965.

Paula Kane, a professor at the University of Pittsburgh, labeled Catholic newspapers “a gold mine” for mapping religions in that city. Students learn that “newspapers tell us about congregations, where they’ve moved, names of leading figures, [and they] led to discussions about what is a sacred space,” she explained. In the wake of the shooting at the Tree of Life synagogue in October 2018, Kane’s students gained insights into the history of Catholic-Jewish relations and understanding the animus against the Jewish people.

All students can gain new perspectives from Catholic newspapers. Charles Strauss, historian of global Catholicism at Mount St. Mary’s University in Maryland, explained how he guides students in comparing coverage of historical events in Catholic newspapers with that in mainstream newspapers. Newspapers, he said, show “how people in real time were trying to interpret those events.”

The Catholic press also serves to help students understand the world by showing them how Catholicism (and religion generally) have shaped social services and beliefs. Thomas Rzeznik, historian of American religion at Seton Hall University, noted that students unfamiliar with Catholic contributions to education and social welfare, for

Continued on page 12

Keeping the Catholic Press in Teaching, Research

Continued from page 11

example, may not think to search Catholic sources on those subjects. And yet Catholics operated the largest private school system in the nation and the largest network of not-for-profit hospitals, services extensively covered in the Catholic news.

Reporting from a Unique Vantage Point

While the mass media and the Catholic press each strive for accurate and timely reporting, the Catholic press does so from its Catholicity. In practical terms, the differences are seen by

**Catholic
journalists
often write
deeper articles,
providing
context
that secular
journalists do
not.**

the inclusion of stories under-reported, not reported, or differently reported in the mass media. Thus, while the general press reported on the treatment of Japanese Americans in World War II, the Catholic press told the stories of Catholic internees. They reported on Pope Leo XIII's great social encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891), with hundreds of articles on its meaning for communities, companies, and workers. Editorials explored then (as they do now) Catholic opinions on many issues of great consequence, including politics, international affairs, the dignity of persons, the concept of "just war," family life

and sexual morality, and popular culture. Many times, these pieces can provide a window into how Catholics thought about issues and drew upon theological principles to argue to conclusions.

Today, we find that Catholic journalists often write deeper, more informed articles, as they provide context and have access to authoritative clergy and lay sources that

secular journalists do not. Speaking at the 2019 Catholic Media Conference, Ann Rodgers, a former reporter and now executive director of communications for the Catholic Diocese of Pittsburgh, mentioned how these two factors work to inform readers of the facts. Although the secular papers may scoop the Catholic papers, she asserted, the Catholic papers nonetheless provide information that other papers may not take the time to find.

There could be no more reasoned plea on [why Catholic journalism matters](#) than that which appeared in an editorial by Greg Erlandson in February 2019. He wrote to highlight the examination by Peter Steinfels ([Commonweal](#), January 25, 2019) of the Pennsylvania grand jury report on sexual abuse by priests in that state, "to restore some fact-based reality to the instant mythology that the Pennsylvania report has created," following the reporting of the secular press. Erlandson affirmed a need for professional Catholic journalism "that allows the voices of the church to be heard, that models both a love for the church and a dedication to truth."

For all these reasons, it is crucial to keep the Catholic press as source material in the mainstream of teaching and scholarship. The need for the Catholic News Archive was voiced by scholars of American Catholic history who noted the difficulty in finding Catholic newspapers and more importantly, their fear that colleagues, unaware of Catholic newspapers, would never find them. As Timothy Meagher, historian and former university archivist at The Catholic University of America, said, "Think how much more significant it would be [if all Catholic newspapers were online](#), ensuring the Catholic tradition, experiences, and views of Catholics continue to be part of the American dialog."

The CRRA, with generous financial support from 25 founding institutions and the Catholic Communication Campaign of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, is filling in the gap left by commercial and other public databases in creating this unique digital resource. ✧

The authors would love to hear from ACCU members. How can the Catholic News Archive tap into scholars on your campus? Would campus papers be a good addition to the Archive? Contact them at mazzenga@cua.edu and jyounger@catholicresearch.org.