

The Wanderer

FOUNDED
IN 1867

VOLUME 107, NO. 17

APRIL 25, 1974

Co-Founders of the English edition (1931)

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Subscription Price: \$9.00 per year; Foreign \$11.00; six months \$5.00; single copies, 25 cents.

Published every Thursday by Wanderer Printing Co., 128 East Tenth Street, St. Paul, Minn. 55101 (additional offices in Madelia, Minn.)
Phone (612) 224-5733. Second Class Postage paid at St. Paul, Minn., and at additional mailing offices.

The Catholic Press

By W. H. MARSHNER

Last year 50,429 fewer people received a diocesan newspaper than the year before. In any other business, that kind of decline would be called catastrophic, or at least precipitous. But in the Catholic press business, last year was one of the "good" years; people even talked about a stabilization. The "rate" of decline, you see, had begun to decline. The Editors of the diocesan newspapers entered rejoicing, therefore, into a very exclusive Wonderland previously inhabited only by crime statisticians and Nixon economists.

Now along comes one of the Nation's most "progressive" Catholic editors (both politically and theologically) to admit that things are in a bad way and to offer an explanation. He is Gerard E. Sherry, editor of the San Francisco Monitor, writing in the April 6th issue of America. "The diocesan press has brought upon itself some of the problems which now plague it," Sherry says. "Many of its editors were not prepared for or properly educated in the meaning of the reform and renewal so ardently desired by the Fathers of Vatican II. Many of us encouraged the excesses in 'Holy Liberty' that were manifest in the period following the end of the Council."

Sound good? Here is some more of the remarkably candid confession: "We stressed reform at the expense of personal renewal. We emphasized the 'New Theology' as an extension of the Gospel message, without checking whether its roots were in reality embedded in the Good News. In other words, we made mistakes — all of us — and this had led to an alienation from our readers and potential subscribers."

Mr. Sherry is directly on target. Historically speaking, he offers us the one and only interpretation of the last eight-or-so years in Catholic press affairs that makes sense. Moreover, Mr. A.E.P. Wall, editor of the National Catholic News Service, has been heard to give the same interpretation — evidence that a consensus is rapidly forming within the trade. And from this particular consensus the trade can only benefit. To admit, you see, that a great many highly publicized people were running "wild" after the Council and are now discredited, is to admit a great deal. It is to admit, for example, (1) the "radical Catholicism" in James Hitchcock's sense is finished, (2) that the Dutch church is washed up, (3) that a huge number of people who said they were living out the "spirit of the Council" were lying either to themselves or to us, (4) that massive numbers of ordinary Catholics saw through these lies and simply abandoned the newspapers that were full of them, and finally (5) it means that the American Catholic press is beginning to discover that good business lies in siding with Pope Paul VI rather than with Hans Kueng. These are encouraging signs.

Now, if only Mr. Sherry will push his analysis a step further. He seems to think that the days of press irresponsibility were short. He says it is a "tragedy" that "the alienation (of the readers) has continued long after most of the mistakes have been recognized and corrected. Few of our diocesan weeklies now," he adds, "can be considered guilty of unprofessionalism either in content or techniques. Indeed, we have come a long way since our experiment in post-censiliar 'streaking' through the empty halls of Vatican II."

Alas, one must dissent. Mr. Sherry's view of the present is not nearly so

convincing as his view of the past. Essentially, his idea that the derelictions of the diocesan press stopped long ago depends upon the further idea that there was a brief season of madness right after the Council, a wild-oats period, if you will, which was long ago terminated by moderation and sobriety. Unfortunately, the facts do not sustain either idea. It was not until 1968 that the Church's teaching on birth control was violently, publicly and concertedly repudiated; it was not until 1970 that Papal infallibility was widely denied; it was not until 1971 that the hassle over celibacy reached crisis proportions; it was not until last year that widespread disobedience surfaced against the Papal norms on first confession; it was not until the last year or two that Catholics began to be told they could divorce, remarry, and still receive the Sacraments; it was not until 1974 that a major push was launched to "baptize" explicit homosexuality. In short, the madness never ceased, and neither did the efforts of diocesan newspapers to take this madness seriously, issue after issue, as "Catholic" thought.

Just last week, the present writer happened to be in the Diocese of Saginaw, where people are "served" by a thing called The Catholic Weekly. All over the front page was smeared an article by the absurd Charles Curran calling on the Church to "rethink" divorce, and inside the paper was yet another article by the same luminary defending perverts. Such "content" is precisely irresponsible and "unprofessional." Today a professional Catholic journalist has no more important duty than to discern genuine expressions of his religion from counterfeits and to exclude the latter from his paper (or at least make sure their spuriousness is clearly labelled). Yet I doubt there are ten Catholic editors in the Country capable of making such discernment. In their overwhelming majority the editors are still living by the rules of yesteryear, assuming that a man who teaches at the Catholic University is an orthodox man, assuming that famous American theologians (Brown, Dulles, McBrien, et al.) must be serious, honest and obedient men. Such assumptions are the worst form of conservatism — blind prejudice. Mr. Sherry himself, sad to say, exhibited such prejudice less than a year ago, when he took up the obscurantist call of the Catholic Biblical Association for episcopal protection (no less) from searching and serious criticism. It is behavior like this — shielding heterodoxy behind the skirts of a new and perverse clericalism — that insures the continued decline of diocesan papers.

Nevertheless, it would be misleading to suggest that heterodoxy as such is the unique cause of our colleagues' woes, or that a mere shift of doctrinal stance would cure those woes. Would that it were so! But the unhappy fact is that the masses of erstwhile subscribers are no longer "out there." The alienation of which Mr. Sherry correctly speaks is not simply an alienation from trendy theology. It is, more tragically, an alienation from the Church herself — an ennui with Catholic things that is buttressed and "justified" by a massive conversion to American secularism. It will take more than orthodoxy to bring these people back; it will take the kind of apostolic zeal that has motivated Catholic missionaries throughout the ages of the Church.