

INTRODUCTION

In 1991 The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights and the Knights of Columbus commissioned the Center for Media and Public Affairs to study major media coverage of the Catholic Church in America from the 1960s through the 1980s. To accomplish this, we employed content analysis, a social science technique that allows researchers to classify news items objectively and systematically. We analyzed a sample of 1,876 news and editorial items from over 10,000 that appeared on CBS, in *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *Time* magazine. This study compared not only changes in coverage over time but variations among these major media outlets.

Our analysis included the frequency and nature of topics, such as routine Church events, news about the pope, dissent within the Church, its relations with other religions, its role in politics, and its positions on abortion, birth control and civil rights. We categorized all viewpoints expressed on these topics and all sources cited in stories, from members of the Church hierarchy and lay Catholics to external groups and government representatives. We not only documented the nature of these sources but the types of issues they addressed. Beyond these essential elements of coverage, we investigated how often official Church teachings were cited and whether they were challenged by critics.

After examining the factual elements contained in news accounts, we analyzed their tone as well through the language used to describe the Church and its teachings. These rhetorical labels identified the Church's political ideology, its structure, and its relevance in the modern world.

This study generated widespread debate about the depth and fairness of the media's coverage of the Church. Many Catholics believe journalists harbor an anti-Catholic bias that is reflected in their stories, which distort the Church's true character. In contrast, journalists maintain that they adhere to their professional code of fairness and balance in reporting on the Church, even though most are outsiders and have a secular perspective. Ultimately, it is their coverage, not their personal beliefs, that determines how the Catholic Church is treated.

Recently, the Catholic League and Our Sunday Visitor asked us to update this study to determine if coverage had changed in the 1990s. We expanded the research base to include all three network evening newscasts (not just CBS). Despite the explosive growth of cable news stations in the last few years, the three major networks remain the most influential sources of televised news. Likewise, we extended our analysis of weekly news magazines from *Time* to *Newsweek* and *US News & World Report* as well. Finally, we added *USA Today* to our newspaper sample. While the *New York Times* and *The Washington Post* serve as opinion leaders for journalists in America, *USA Today* has become a national newspaper for a broad-based audience. The current study examined 569 news items from over three thousand appearing during this decade.

Ongoing events and new controversies have kept the Catholic Church in the news during the 1990s. While the media continues to chronicle the pope's extensive travels, current coverage is notable for its attention to alleged crimes by clerics, especially pedophilia, a topic absent from past coverage. For example, allegations made and later retracted regarding Joseph Cardinal Bernardin captured

headlines during the last years of his life. Among other new subjects that framed news coverage of the Church in the '90s were scientific advances in artificial reproduction, shifts in the Church population, and challenges to the limited roles of Catholic women.

We will present our findings for media coverage of the Church in the 1990s, then compare these results to those of the previous three decades. For purposes of uniformity, we restricted our historical comparisons to outlets used for the original study. While the present analysis is self-contained, a fuller appreciation of this subject requires the reading the original study as well.

AMOUNT OF COVERAGE

To analyze media coverage of the Catholic Church, we concentrated on a sample of nationally influential news outlets: *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, and *USA Today*, which are the nation's most influential general interest daily newspapers; *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *US News & World Report*, the most widely read general interest weekly news magazines; and the evening newscasts of ABC, CBS, and NBC, which are the nation's most frequently watched broadcast news programs. These outlets serve as opinion leaders for both the general public and the journalistic profession. This sample represents a considerable expansion of our previous sample, which was limited to the *Times* and *Post*, *Time*, and CBS. Therefore, as we note below, our analysis of historical trends will be limited to the four outlets that were examined in both studies.

As in our previous study, we selected a five-year period from 1994-1998, corresponding to the mid-decade time block examined in earlier decades. We focused on news items that dealt with the Catholic Church in the United States. For example, the sample included news about policy statements by the Vatican that would affect American Catholics, but not news that focused primarily on the Church's role in other countries. We defined news items to include both news and editorial pieces, but not letters to the editor.

During the five-year period that we studied, the nine national news outlets produced 3,103 news items regarding the Catholic Church. Nearly 90 percent of these (2,820) appeared in the three

newspapers, and the majority (1,778) appeared in *The New York Times* alone. Therefore, to create a more manageable but still representative sample, we took 10 percent random samples of all newspaper articles, in addition to all stories that appeared in the news magazines or on the network evening news shows. This procedure produced an overall sample of 569 news items, which included 180 *New York Times* articles, 79 *Washington Post* articles, and 27 *USA Today* articles; 30 pieces in *Time* magazine, 21 in *Newsweek*, and 16 in *US News & World Report*; 77 stories broadcast on ABC, 69 on CBS, and 70 on NBC. (See table 1)

The sheer number of news stories that we coded is itself significant in understanding the image of the Catholic Church that the news audience receives. For example, readers of *The New York Times* would have seen, on average, nearly a story per day on the Church, over twice the volume of coverage to which *The Washington Post* readers were exposed. The *Post*, in turn, published three times as many stories about the Church as did *USA Today*. In fact, the disparity between America's most "elite" national newspaper – *The New York Times* – and the only truly national paper aimed at a general audience – *USA Today* – is remarkable. Whereas the *Times* averaged nearly one story per day, *USA Today* published barely one per week.

The disparity in coverage among newspapers stands in sharp contrast to the other news genres that we sampled. *Time* published about twice as many stories on the Church as did *US News* (30 vs 16), straddling *Newsweek*'s total of 21 stories. The networks were even more similar in the amount of coverage they devoted to the Church, with only a trivial number of stories separating the leader

(ABC) from its two competitors (CBS and NBC). In this case, however, it was the absence of differences that proved noteworthy. ABC attracted considerable attention when it hired the first religion beat reporter on a network news show. Nonetheless, ABC devoted about the same level of attention to the Catholic Church as did the other networks. In terms of air time, ABC led with 1 hour 53 minutes, only eight minutes ahead of NBC's 1 hour 45 minutes, with CBS lagging behind at 1 hour 29 minutes. Over a five-year period, differences of this magnitude are trivial.

TOPICS

By far the largest number of stories about the Catholic Church were straightforward accounts of predictable and relatively noncontroversial occurrences, such as announcements of parish events, promotions of clergy, and the accomplishments of outstanding Catholics (see table 2). In our sample, such “Church happenings” were the subject of 239 stories, over one-third (34 percent) of the entire sample. For example, *The New York Times* profiled how the destruction and resurrection of an old church affected the congregation.

The parishioners of St. Philip Neri Roman Catholic Church stood shoulder to shoulder in June and wept. Octogenarian descendants of Italian immigrants and teenagers from the Dominican Republic watched in horror as flames consumed their century-old church in the Bedford Park section of the Bronx.

Six months later, the majestic arches of a new roof are sprouting from a maze of construction scaffolding inside the church’s sanctuary. To the delight of St. Philip Neri officials, more than \$700,000 of the \$1 million needed to reconstruct the historic building already lies in church coffers.

Donations from former parishioners, graduates of the church’s elementary school, other churches and sympathetic strangers have poured in from across the city, the region and the world. Contributions ranging from a crumpled dollar bill to a corporate check for \$100,000 have arrived continually at the 3,000-member church since the fire, which was caused by an electrical spark on June 15. ...

Parishioners said the drive to rebuild the church, which was built by Italian laborers in 1899, has created a sense of commonality in the parish of elderly Italians and Irish and young Latinos, blacks and Koreans. (*The New York Times*, January 5, 1998, p.B3)

Such coverage did not necessarily reflect positively on the Church, as the following *Washington Post* story illustrates:

The Vatican permitted scrutiny of one of the most notorious periods in Roman

Catholic Church history, opening its archives of the Inquisition and showing that even some versions of the Bible were once blacklisted. Scholars now will be able to study cases such as that of the astronomer Galileo, condemned by the Inquisition for claiming the Earth revolved around the Sun, and Giordano Bruno, a monk burned for heresy in 1600 in Rome's Campo dei Fiori square.

Also opened was the infamous Index of Forbidden Books that Catholics were forbidden to read or possess on pain of excommunication. It showed that non-Latin versions of the Bible were on the blacklist because the church was suspicious of allowing access to sacred texts without ecclesiastical guidance. (*The Washington Post*, January 23, 1998, p.A30)

News about the Pope's activities and pronouncements accounted for another 99 stories or one out of every seven (14 percent) in the sample. Thus, coverage of the Church's spiritual leader and the aspects of its daily functioning accounted for nearly half of all news coverage (48 percent). In the current decade, the media noted all signs of the Pope's failing health. For example, Andrea Mitchell gave the following chronology on the *NBC Nightly News*:

"July 15, 1992, he suffered the removal of a precancerous tumor and gall bladder surgery, November 1993 a dislocated shoulder, April 1994 hip replacement, October 1996 appendectomy and now what is assumed to be Parkinson's disease, according to a neurologist at Georgetown University." (*NBC Nightly News*, January 19, 1998)

But much of this coverage simply recounted the schedules and particulars of papal appearances, as in this *Newsweek* piece:

This week, on his fourth – and quite likely last – visit to the United States, the pope will address the United Nations on its 50th anniversary. It will also be 80 years to the day that Paul VI became the first pope to visit the United States and to address the United Nations....

In his five-day sweep John Paul II will say four outdoor masses – two at sports stadiums, one at a racetrack and one in New York's Central Park. He'll pray with President Bill Clinton in Newark, N.J., meet with rabbis and other religious leaders

in New York City and parade through Baltimore. (*Newsweek*, October 9, 1995, p.63)

Such stories typically form a noncontroversial backdrop against which more conflictual or controversial stories stood out in sharp relief. Paramount among these was the category of crimes by clerics. Allegations of wrongdoing, such as sexual abuse by priests, made up the third most frequent category of stories about the Church, accounting for one in every 12 news items (eight percent) over the entire five-year period. Typically, they involved the exploitation of under-aged males by priests. Some stories focused on a particular case. For example, Forrest Sawyer of ABC *World News Tonight* reported that:

"In Stockton, Calif. a jury awarded two brothers who were molested by a priest \$30 million in damages from the Catholic diocese. They said the diocese tried to conceal the fact that their family priest, Rev. O'Grady, had a history of abusing children."
(ABC *World News Tonight* , July 17, 1998)

One NBC report by Andrea Mitchell examined the issue from a broader financial perspective, noting that thousands of such sexual abuse cases were pending across the country. The damages sought in one were \$500 million. Mitchell said that since 1986, some insurers have excluded sexual abuse from their policies. Actual damages paid were difficult to estimate, according to a spokesman from the National Conference of Bishops that she interviewed. "The church has paid under \$100 million. There is no requirement that churches or dioceses report either suits or settlements, so we are only guessing." (12/7/94)

A *Time* piece also explored this issue extensively, from the salacious details of sexual abuse to how

the Church deals with offenders:

Over a period of 14 years, Father John Hanlon of St. Mary's in Plymouth, Massachusetts, would occasionally take boys under his charge to a nude beach. It was, a lawyer would later claim, the parish priest's way "to desensitize" them to their own nakedness. Hanlon, however, would subject his wards to more dissolute initiations. He sexually abused 10 of them, ranging in age from 12 to 15, including William Wood, now 27. ...Hanlon, now 65, denied the charges, but last week a jury in Plymouth County found the priest guilty, and he was sentenced to three concurrent life terms for the rape of Wood. ...The harsh judgment on Hanlon is only the latest chapter in a plague of lawsuits that is bedeviling the Roman Catholic Church in America. "Roderick MacLeish Jr., a Boston lawyer involved in civil action actions against alleged child abusers, claims that of the 400 active cases handled by his firm, 250 involve clergy – and the vast majority of them belong to the Catholic Church.

"Over the last few years, the Church has been forced to pay out tens of millions of dollars in fines and settlements. Meanwhile, if they are not subjects of criminal investigation, most fallen priests are sent into therapy and are either retired or dispatched to posts that do not put them into regular contact with children." The diocese-by-diocese approach has created a label of reactions. Rather than go into the problem piecemeal, says Lisa Cahill, professor of ethics at Boston College's theology department, "the missing piece is for the Church to take responsibility as an institution." At the moment, however, Rome considers pedophilia a local American problem. (*Time*, May 9, 1994, p.56)

All other topics that accounted for more than 2 percent of the coverage likewise concerned issues that involved controversy and conflict. They include the role of the Church in American politics (6 percent of all stories); and the changing nature of the Church population, such as the substantial growth of a Catholic Hispanic community; disputes over Canon law, the official body of Church teachings; and the continuing debate over the Church's position on abortion, each of which accounted for an additional 5 percent of the coverage.

Among these issues, the most diffuse involved the Church's role as a religious body operating in the

political realm. A 1997 *New York Times* profile of John M. Smith, the new bishop of Trenton, New Jersey, illustrated his concern over the Church's ability to sustain programs for the poor without sufficient government assistance.

Churches are providing services that are the province of the government. Inner-city Catholic schools provide a quality education to many non-Catholics. Besides education, there's alcoholic treatment, shelters for abused wives, relieving the strife of poor people. The Catholic church, to its credit, never abandoned the inner cities.

But we can't do it without state and Federal funding. We're going to encourage Catholics to exercise their vote in elections, to lobby for funding. Catholic schools, with 52,000 students, save taxpayers millions. Vouchers would help us very much. (*The New York Times*, June 22, 1997, p.13NJ)

Changes in the character of the Church's population discussed both the clergy and the laity. NBC noted the Church's growth in Hispanic areas of the country. For example, the pastor of St. Francis of Assisi in San Jose, California, observed that "three years ago when I came here, we had 300 families for the parish. Now we have 700 families and we gained 120 families in the last six months." (*NBC Nightly News*, 6/28/97)

A more extensive piece by *U.S. News & World Report* examined the problem created by the growth of the Church population and the drastic decline of available priests.

Martin Luther once described his ideal church as a "priesthood of all believers," where God and the faithful could commune without the intercession of a priest. Ironically, the Roman Catholic Church is now moving toward a variation on that vision – not out of theological conviction but because it is deep in the throes of a clerical shortfall. More than 2,000 American parishes – about 11 percent – now lack a resident priest and must be served by circuit riders.

While the ranks of the Catholic faithful in the United States have swelled from 45

million to 60 million since 1965, the number of priests has shrunk from 58,632 to 49,551. And many of those are retired or inactive. Sociologists Richard Schoenherr and Lawrence Young have estimated that in 1975 there were 1,102 lay Catholics for every active priest. By 1995, the ratio was 1,797 to 1. Many parishes are so strapped that lay people now do everything from handling business matters to distributing Communion wafers previously consecrated by a priest. (*U.S. News & World Report* December 30, 1996/January 6, 1997)

Canon Law is an esoteric subject rarely discussed in the general media. But it was prominently featured last year when Bill Clinton violated one of its rules:

President Clinton took Holy Communion during a South African Mass late last month at the invitation of the local priest, White House officials said today in response to criticism that giving Communion to Mr. Clinton, a Baptist, violated Roman Catholic doctrine.

Mr. Clinton never receives Communion in Catholic churches in the United States. But Tarry Toiv, a White House spokesman, said the priest, Father Mohlomi Makobane, told White House staff members before Mr. Clinton's visit to his Soweto church that "this was the policy of the South African Conference of Bishops, that Communion was open to non-Catholics."

No such lenient policy exists, the Southern African bishops declared late last week. In January, however, the bishops did issue rules that allow non-Catholics to receive Communion in certain special circumstances, and the Vatican has requested clarification of that policy. (*The New York Times*, April 7, 1998, p.A20)

The importance of who may participate in Eucharist was emphasized by the Vatican's involvement in this event and disputes over the interpretation of Church doctrine. The same *New York Times* story noted that:

The President's decision to receive Communion prompted church officials from South Africa to the Vatican to the United States to declare in recent days that Father Makobane had misinterpreted church doctrine.

"The action taken by the priest in South Africa, however well-intended, was legally

and doctrinally wrong in the eyes of the church law and church doctrine,” John Cardinal O’Conner, the archbishop of New York, said in a Palm Sunday sermon.

Explaining that he was trying to address confusion among Catholics caused by the news of the incident, the Cardinal said: “Some undoubtedly believe that if one has enough prestige or money, anything goes.” The church, he said, should not contribute to such perceptions. (*The New York Times*, April 7, 1998, p.A20)

The Church has been a consistent if minor player in news about one of this country’s most divisive issues – abortion. The international ramifications of its position were highlighted by the following front-page story:

After a day of tortuous closed-door talks that pitted Vatican diplomats against many other delegates, the United Nations population conference failed tonight to reach a compromise on the contentious issue of abortion.

Standing alone, Vatican diplomats blocked a consensus on a formula sponsored by Pakistan, saying they found it unacceptable. The proposed formula itself took five hours of haggling among 15 countries. ...

The move by the Vatican reflected Pope John Paul II’s ardent crusade against abortion. But many delegates have noted that abortion is only one element of the far broader issue facing the meeting – averting a disaster in global population growth. (*The New York Times*, September 7, 1994, p.A1)

Another article in *The Washington Post* demonstrated the diverse political issues connected to promoting the Church’s pro-life position.

America’s top Catholic leaders yesterday launched an aggressive new campaign to lobby against abortion and to mobilize parishes across the country into a powerful new voting bloc against candidates who support abortion rights.

The bold assertion by the nation’s Catholic bishops marks a new era in the church’s political activism. While the church’s 400 bishops have always strongly opposed abortion, many have been reluctant to impose their views in a public arena. Not since the 1970s have they vowed as a group to so directly and visibly influence politicians and voters on such a critical issue. (*The Washington Post*, November 19, 1998, p.A1)

The longstanding debate between science and religion as it pertains to the Church accounted for another 4 percent of all stories. *The New York Times* sketched the outlines of John Paul's thinking on this subject in an article entitled "The Philosopher Pope."

The powerful encyclical issued last week by Pope John Paul II...is a missive from a religious philosopher to the world's intelligentsia. It is a plea for an end to the separation of faith and reason and an argument against the "philosophy of nothing," as he calls the various forms of nihilism that have taken root in a war-weary century.

Written for the bishops of the Catholic Church, the decree, called "Fides et Ratio" (Faith and Reason), argues that these two strains of human endeavor need not exclude each other in the pursuit of truth. Science and rational thought do not wipe out the exploration of "the fundamental questions which pervade human life," as John Paul writes. Similarly religion, especially Catholicism, needs the pursuit of rational debate to keep such spiritual matters from "withering into myth or superstition."...

The Pope also wants to bring the questions of morality back into the pursuit of science -- an issue that at once seems as medieval as Galileo and as modern as Hiroshima. If science does not move beyond the utilitarian, he argues, it could "soon prove inhuman and even become the potential destroyer of the human race." (*The New York Times*, October 21, 1998, p.A24)

The New York Times also noted the Church's involvement in another science-related controversy -- cloning.

Cardinal O'Connor said that the joining of a man and a woman is the proper way to create human life, and that cloning perverts that process. "It is a drastic invasion of human parenthood," the Cardinal said. "This does disrespect both to the dignity of human procreation and the dignity of the conjugal union."

The Cardinal also said he wondered if human cloning might result in the production of people for the purposes of warfare or slavery. (*The New York Times*, March 14, 1997, p.B2)

Catholic relations with other religions, the role of women in the Church, and the broader question of the role and treatment of Church dissenters each accounted for an additional 3 percent of the

coverage. Exemplifying the severest consequences for dissent was a *Washington Post* piece on one of the most controversial actions by a Catholic official during this decade:

A little-known bishop in Lincoln, Neb., has sent shock waves through the Roman Catholic Church by threatening to excommunicate Catholics in his diocese by May 15 if they do not resign from a dozen groups he deems “totally incompatible with the Catholic Faith.”

The forbidden groups include several challenging church teaching on abortion, birth control or the ban on female priests. But one group – Call to Action, a Chicago-based group promoting church reform – counts among its members thousands of priests and nuns and several American bishops. (*The Washington Post*, July 11, 1995, p.A1)

While the changing role of women in the Church is sometimes covered as a form of dissent, we also coded the broader category of women’s issues. This 1995 *Washington Post* article illustrates the fine but firm line the Pope draws on this subject.

Pope John Paul II issued a manifesto on women’s rights today, putting himself on the side of equal treatment and apologizing for past discrimination in the Roman Catholic Church, but reaffirming the ban on women priests.

In a 19-page letter addressed to “women throughout the world,” the Pope went so far as to praise women’s liberation as “substantially a positive” process, despite what he termed “mistakes,” while holding firm to Roman Catholic teachings on issues such as priesthood and abortion that long have been bones of contention between feminists and the church hierarchy.

The latter summed up several weeks of papal utterances on women’s issues in advance of the U.N. conference on women scheduled for September in Beijing. The Vatican, conservative on issues of sex and birth control and opposed to abortion and the expansion of gender definition to include homosexuality, has been gearing up for a possible conflict at the China meeting with secular feminists. (*The Washington Post*, March 29, 1996, p.A3)

Rounding out the top dozen topics (with 2 percent of the coverage) was education, with special

reference to the role of Catholic schooling in America. These dozen topics together accounted for 93 percent of all coverage of the Catholic Church in the national news media.

Just as variations in the amount of coverage tell us something about the differing approach that various news organizations took to the Catholic Church, so did the topics on which their coverage focused. Television's coverage was concentrated on what might be called "official" news. This medium produced the heaviest coverage of the Pope, who provides good visuals on his many papal visits around the globe, as well as the catchall institutional category that we termed "Church happenings." These two categories together accounted for almost two-thirds (64 percent) of all television news coverage of the Catholic Church. This concentration of coverage of institutional activities dwarfed that of any other outlet in the sample. For example, the number of stories in our *New York Times* sample nearly equaled that of the three networks combined. Yet the 180 *Times* articles that we analyzed included only nine discussions of the Pope's activities compared to 65 out of the 216 television news stories.

Conversely, and perhaps unexpectedly, television news paid relatively little attention to the Church's role in some hot button political controversies. For example, the networks devoted proportionately less coverage than did other outlets to the Church and the abortion issue, civil rights, the role of women, and birth control. (Our analysis covers only the intersection of these issues with the Catholic Church, not the total coverage of the issues themselves.)

Perhaps equally surprising was the outlet that paid the most attention (as a proportion of its overall coverage) to the intersection of religion and politics. It was *USA Today*, which devoted fully one-sixth (17 percent) of its coverage to the Church's role in the political system:

St. Peter Church is a commanding presence in downtown Boerne, Texas, its twin towers looking down over the historic center of the city in the hill country near San Antonio.

When the Roman Catholic Archdiocese announced plans to demolish most of the 70-year-old church, city officials invoked historic preservation laws to stop the project.

The zoning dispute might have remained intensely local, but it got caught up in a constitutional argument over the relationship between the courts, local governments, and religious practices and institutions. Now the Supreme Court has agreed to hear the case early next year in a move that could redefine the relationship between church and state.

The Texas dispute took on national dimensions when the archdiocese invoked a newly passed federal law in its fight to keep the city from interfering with its demolition plans.

The 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act was aimed at encouraging governments to accommodate religious practices. In effect, the law tells federal courts how to weigh disputes that arise when governments seek to enforce general laws in ways that impinge on religion. (*USA Today*, October 16, 1996, p.A3)

USA Today also paid the most attention to the Church's role in the politics of abortion – 10 percent of its coverage, double the overall average.

For example, one article recounted a cardinal's call to halt protests at abortion clinics:

A cardinal's plea for a moratorium on protests at abortion clinics has slowed but hasn't stopped the demonstrations. ...

Law, who has urged activists to take their prayer vigils off the streets and into churches, is in the forefront of a movement by moderate abortion-rights opponents to end violence. (*USA Today*, January 11, 1995, p.A2)

Such coverage came at the expense of a focus on the more traditional institutional functioning of the Church. *USA Today* devoted by far the least attention to Church happenings, only one-tenth of its total coverage, compared to nearly two-fifths of the coverage in both *The New York Times* and the

television news shows. Thus, our newspaper samples produced 82 stories on Church happenings in *The New York Times* compared to a mere three stories in *USA Today*.

Other areas of social controversy proved to be a specialty of *The Washington Post*. The *Post* produced the heaviest coverage of crimes by clerics (13 percent vs. 8 percent overall), dissent in the Church (7 percent vs. 3 percent overall), and women's issues (6 percent vs. 3 percent overall). Dissent is a natural subject for the *Post*, because the structure of political news requires referencing critics of a given law, policy or proposal. The prominence of the women's issue is a function of coverage of legislation that affects women across the country, as well as the presence of prominent women's groups and individuals in Washington, D.C.

Among the stories on clerical wrongdoing in the *Post* was the following account of a priest charged with molesting altar boys.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Dallas agreed yesterday to pay \$23 million to eight former altar boys who were sexually abused for years by a priest, by far the largest settlement the Catholic Church has ever been forced to reach in such a case. ...

The Catholic Church has been besieged in the last decade with cases of sexual abuse of minors by priests – more than 200 of them have been jailed for that offense since the 1980s – but few are more extensive than the one in Dallas involving Rudolph “Rudy” Kos.

Kos has been convicted of molesting altar boys and several other youths over a period of 11 years in three church parishes. The victims accused of Kos of hundreds of incidents of sexual abuse, beginning for some of the boys when they were as young as 9 years old. The abuse ranged from genital massages to forced oral sex, and at times also including drugs and alcohol. (*The Washington Post*, July 11, 1998, p.A1)

A *Post* piece on dissent in the Church involved reaction to the Vatican's threat to punish those who challenged its teachings:

Liberal Catholic scholars reacted yesterday with surprise and disappointment to a formal decree by Pope John Paul II that church theologians who break with Catholic teachings on such subjects as euthanasia, sex outside marriage and the ordination of women could face punishment.

While the Vatican has always asserted its authority on these controversial issues, the pope's latest document reinforces the church's ability to enforce its rules by encoding these teachings in canon law, the core beliefs of Roman Catholics. Church leaders will now find it easier to discipline dissenters with what the pope called "just punishment," which can mean anything from a temporary suspension from teaching duties to excommunication.

The pope's sudden decision to clarify and solidify the church's position reflects one of his first attempts to lay down a lasting legacy for his papacy. At a time when a growing number of Catholics, particularly in America, are challenging church teachings, John Paul wants to quiet the voices of liberal Catholics who dissent from essential dogmas.

But many of the university teachers and other theologians who are the chief target of the pope's order said John Paul's decision would only increase the divisiveness....(*The Washington Post*, July 2, 1998, p.A1)

The Washington Post also investigated women's issues. The following example examined the possible reasons for the decline of women religious:

Specialists differ on why young women are not joining religious orders. The Rev. Andrew W. Greeley, a Catholic sociologist, speculated about several possibilities in his book "The Catholic Myth." They include the "emancipation" of the orders, which lead to a removal of the rigid life that appealed to some members.

Perhaps, he said, younger women no longer see anything unique in the vocations of nuns that could not be achieved in lay ministries. (*The Washington Post*, February 26, 1994, p.B7)

Not surprisingly, considering that it serves the nation's capital, the *Post* also devoted an above average proportion of its coverage to the Church's role in politics – 10 percent of its total coverage. That is well below *USA Today*'s 17 percent, but double the 5 percent that we recorded in *The New York Times* and the television networks. A 1997 *Post* piece explored the Church's opposition to physician-assisted suicide initiatives in various states:

[A conference] of bishops in Maryland, the District and Wilmington, Del., is working with hospice organizations and other groups to introduce a bill in Maryland that would outlaw physician-assisted suicide. The bill would be introduced when the General Assembly reconvenes in January.

How much of a role religion will play in renewed local debates on physician-assisted suicide is unclear. Thus far, the anti-religion rhetoric seen in Oregon – particularly against the Catholic Church – has not been seen in this area, despite the local church's "high visibility" in opposition to assisted suicide. ...

The Catholic Church opposed assisted suicide based on its reading of Scripture, on centuries of tradition and on reason...And it believes in a "natural law" that tells any person instinctively that certain acts are wrong, such as stealing, committing murder or taking one's life. Natural law derives from God's law, which is God's will, and takes precedence over human laws. (*The Washington Post*, November 15, 1997, p.B8)

SOURCES

If the topics of discussion tell us what the news is about, the sources who are quoted tell us which voices are heard. To ascertain who supplied the information for these stories, we identified every named source in every story who provided information or commentary for the news. This resulted in 2,224 identifiable source references. (See table 3) Of these, just under two-thirds (63 percent, or 1,418 mentions) were individuals affiliated with the Church in one capacity or another, although not all supported official Church positions.

The hierarchy dominated Church voices in the news, with 571 citations. They accounted for over two out of every five Catholic sources (44 percent), and one out of four sources (26 percent) overall. As defined here, the hierarchy included all members of the clergy at or above the level of bishop. Lay Catholics made up the second most prominent group with 386 citations, accounting for over one out of four Catholic sources (29 percent) and one out of six sources overall (17 percent). Priests and other members of religious orders counted for another 207 sources, representing one out of six Catholic sources (15 percent) and just under one out of ten (9 percent) overall. (Priests accounted for 69 percent of this source category and women religious 31 percent.) The only other major group of Catholic sources consisted of officials of Catholic schools, who appeared in 102 quotations.

Among non-Catholic sources, three groups were especially prominent. Government officials were quoted 172 times, accounting for just over one out of five (21 percent) non-Catholic sources overall.

They were divided evenly between federal government officials, on one hand, and state and local officials on the other. The only other major non-Catholic groups to be quoted with any frequency were the leaders of other churches and religious scholars from outside the Catholic Church. The former were cited 108 times and the latter 104 times, each representing about one-eighth of the non-Catholic total. There were no substantively significant differences across outlets in the patterns of sourcing that we encountered. For example, the proportion of sources from the Church hierarchy ranged only from a low of 21 percent at *USA Today* to a high of 34 percent at *US News & World Report*.

In addition to categories of sources, we identified the individuals who were quoted most often. (See table 4) In light of the media's topical focus on the papacy, and the concentration of sourcing among the Church hierarchy, the results will come as no surprise. Pope John Paul II was the runaway winner with 90 quotations, more than four times that of the runner up, New York's Cardinal O'Connor, who had 21 citations. Chicago's Cardinal Bernardin finished a close third with 20 quotes. The top ten list included seven cardinals, and the only individual outside the hierarchy to make the list was the prolific scholar and writer Father Andrew Greeley, who was quoted 11 times.

PRESENTING CHURCH TEACHINGS

Central to our inquiry is the debate over issues involving the Church and its teachings. In order to evaluate the media's presentation of substantive issues, we first needed to understand its overall parameters. So we sought to determine how often the Church's teachings were presented in the news, as well as the manner in which they were presented. In addition to the frequency of such reporting, we also measured how often these teachings were challenged or refuted by critics or opponents in the same story in which they were presented. To accomplish this we examined every statement that was explicitly identified as representing the official Church view. Once this was noted, we examined the rest of the story to see if any other source argued against the Church teaching. This allowed us to differentiate between stories that simply recounted a Vatican statement and those that provided a broader context by including criticism of the doctrine.

We found that official Church teachings appeared very frequently in the news. (See table 5) A majority (56 percent) of all stories in the sample presented material that was specifically identified as official doctrine of the Church. For example, the following article from *Time* magazine not only stated Church doctrine on a range of social issues but the philosophy behind it.

Evangelium Vitae, the Gospel of Life, is the 11th encyclical by Pope John Paul II, comprising his views on the most pressing moral issues facing the Roman Catholic Church-and the world. He wrote to his brother bishops in 1991 asking for their ideas on the subject, and their responses are reflected in his thoughtful writing. In the 17th year of his papacy, he sees new threats "on an alarmingly vast scale." While reaffirming the value and dignity of life, he is concerned with what he terms a prevailing "culture of death." He uncompromisingly persists in his condemnation of abortion, contraception and euthanasia, and decries the techniques of artificial

reproduction.

The 189-page document, published last week, concludes that governments, as much as individuals, play a part in the tragedy unfolding around the globe. When the right to life is left to the will of the majority, John Paul preaches, democracy "effectively moves toward a form of totalitarianism." Society has a moral conscience, he argues, and must be guided by it. Appealing beyond his Catholic flock, he calls on political figures not to pass laws that disregard the dignity of the individual and thereby "undermine the very fabric of society." (*Time*, April 10, 1995, p.43)

An additional 26 percent of all stories gave voice to Catholic clergy. These individuals sometimes presented the teachings of the Church without making a specific claim to speak for the Church. At other times they made noncontroversial comments on events or occurrences: For example, *U.S. News & World Report* ran an item on an online forum in which New York's Cardinal O'Connor used a laptop computer to discuss his views on matters ranging from television to theology. The article quotes his response to a Catholic homosexual with AIDS who was considering becoming an Episcopalian: "Clearly you should belong to the church you think God wants you to belong to." (*U.S. News & World Report*, January 16, 1995, p.19) In another article, the eminently quotable Cardinal O'Connor echoed the sentiments of a participant at an open-air concert where young people from eight New York dioceses gathered for music, prayer and religious exhibits. "'I head someone call this 'Godstock,' which I thought was impressive,' Cardinal O'Connor said.'" (*New York Times*, August 15, 1994, p.B5)

If we combined the stories that explicitly identified the Church's teaching with those in which clergy implicitly echoed its teaching, about five stories out of six presented a representative of the Church's

views on some issue, either with or without debate. Fewer than one story out of five (18 percent) failed to present the Church's view on some issues in any fashion.

Of course it might be argued that news about the Catholic Church almost by definition must present some statement of Church doctrine, whether as part of a debate or simply to explain the nature of a newsworthy event to non-Catholic audiences. Nonetheless, we found considerable variation across news genres in presenting official Church doctrine. The television networks proved least likely to present official Church positions. Only half (50 percent) of all TV news stories did so, with almost no variation across individual networks. At the other end of the spectrum were the weekly newsmagazines, which presented Church doctrines in nearly three out of four (72 percent) stories. Presumably this difference can be traced to the relative brevity forced upon television news stories compared to the length of presentation available to magazine writers.

However, this explanation cannot account for the differences we found among the newspapers in our sample. *USA Today*, which is well known for the brevity of its stories, proved even more likely than the newsmagazines to present official Church positions. Nearly three out of four (74 percent) *USA Today* stories did so. *The Washington Post* was close behind with 70 percent of its stories. In sharp contrast *The New York Times*, famous for its in-depth treatment of the news, matched the networks, with only 50 percent of its stories presenting the Church's position. In fact, the *Times* was actually less likely than the *CBS Evening News* (52 percent) to present Church teachings in its stories. Thus, it appears that the prominence of Church teachings in the news is related to presentation styles and

editorial decisions as well as the exigencies of news formats.

The fact that news stories frequently presented statements of Church doctrine is important, but it does not tell us *how* doctrine was presented. The prominence of Church teachings helps to establish the extent of issue coverage, but it does not tell us whether doctrine was questioned or debated. It is also necessary to know how many of these stories included some debate over the teachings that were presented. Therefore, we examined every story to identify those in which one or more Church teachings was criticized or rejected. Among the 320 stories that presented an official Church doctrine, just under half (48 percent) did so without debate. (See table 6.) In the remaining stories that debated Church policy, critics from outside the Church accounted for the largest source of alternative views-- 28 percent, compared to 20 percent of stories that featured dissenters from within the Church.

Once again, this overall picture masks significant differences among the various media outlets. The outlets that were most likely to present Church teachings in the first place were also most likely to present dissent from those teachings. Conversely, the outlets that paid the least attention to Church doctrine were also least likely to present such doctrine in a controversial light. Perhaps reflecting its political orientation, *The Washington Post* was most likely to counter Church doctrines with dissenting viewpoints, doing so nearly two-thirds (65 percent) of the time. Following close behind were the newsmagazines, which differed little from one another, and collectively presented criticism 62 percent of the time that they printed Church teachings. *USA Today* also finished above the group

average in presenting dissent, in 55 percent of relevant stories. All these outlets were notable for having covered Church positions in at least 70 percent of all articles about the church.

The Washington Post highlighted dissent from official Catholic doctrine both within and outside the Church. For example, a story from U.S. Senator Edward Kennedy's 1994 re-election campaign invoked the ongoing battle over separating politics and religion:

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy (D), a Catholic, and his Republican challenger, businessman Mitt Romney, a Mormon, have said they believe religion is a private matter, yet they have been repeatedly drawn into a collision of faith and politics.

In the latest development, Kennedy has come under criticism from Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, who rebuked the senator for saying he believes that women should be ordained as priests, a position at odds with Catholic doctrine.

Earlier in the week, Kennedy, responding to a question from the Boston Globe, said he counts himself among "the growing number of Catholics who support the ordination of women as priests." Pope John Paul II recently reasserted the view that women may not be priests and that Catholics may not debate the subject. (*The Washington Post*, September 10, 1994, p.A3)

A month later, the *Post* examined another conflict involving the position of women in the Church. Under the headline "Nuns, Bishops Clash at Vatican Over the Role of Churchwomen," the *Post* reported on attempts of women religious to challenge authority at its highest source.

The police who patrol St. Peter's Square could scarcely believe their eyes. Defying local laws, American nuns marched into the cavernous piazza last Saturday to carry their bold message straight to the windows of Pope John Paul II's apartment.

Chanting "We shall not be silenced," the four nuns and several supporters raised banners that declared: "They are talking about us without us" and "Women want to be a part, not apart." Police quickly broke up the demonstration, confiscating the banners and detaining the nuns, who were released an hour later after identity checks.

The protest dramatized one of the most controversial issues confronting the Roman Catholic Church -- the pope's adamant refusal to alter the Vatican's male-dominated hierarchy and empower women with greater rights, including ordainment to the priesthood. (*The Washington Post*, October 27, 1994, p.A33)

While noting the Church's official position on the ordination issue, the *Post* also stated the opposition's view: The Catholic Church has always insisted that it has no authority to ordain women as priests because Jesus Christ chose only men as his apostles. But women's rights groups contend that Christ was merely following the cultural norms of his time and that the Church should now accept the modern notion that women deserve to be accorded equal respect and treatment as men. Extending the critique beyond ordination, "Doris Gottemoeller, head of the Sisters of Mercy of the Americas, told the bishops they should be more aware of 'feminist spirituality . . . as a sign of the times and a gift to the Church.'" (*The Washington Post*, October 27, 1994, p.A33)

At the other end of the spectrum, we once again found an unlikely pairing of *The New York Times* and the network evening news shows. The three networks were sufficiently similar to be treated as a single entity. This odd couple gave relatively little notice to Church doctrine and even less to debate over that doctrine. When Church positions were presented, they were debated in network news stories only 37 percent of the time. The level of dissent or criticism was only slightly higher in *The New York Times*, appearing in 42 percent of relevant stories.

In general, then, we found that the news organizations that were most likely to cover doctrinal issues

were also most likely to provide forums for dissent from them. What was less predictable was that the least issue oriented and conflictual reportage would appear in *The New York Times* and on the network evening news. It should be remembered, however, that these findings are based on the proportion of stories that fit into the relevant categories. Because the sheer number of stories about the Catholic Church was so high in *The New York Times*, a *Times* reader would have been exposed to a greater volume of debate than would readers or viewers of other national news outlets. It is only in terms of percentage differences that the *Times* slides down the scale.

DEBATING CHURCH DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

The battle of ideas involving the Church cannot be assessed fully from the distribution of topics and sources or the structure of stories involving Church teachings. It is necessary to examine directly how the news media presented the entire range of opinions on Church teachings and activities. In order to understand how the policies and teachings of the Catholic Church were viewed in the media, we analyzed all opinions by sources or reporters on 36 different issues related to Church life.

These issues included such frequently and heatedly debated topics as the status and role of women and minorities in the Church, the role of the laity, prohibitions of abortion, contraception and homosexual acts, debates over freedom of expression versus Church authority, Church-state relations, and ecumenism. In order for an opinion be coded, the source or reporter had to make a clear appraisal of Church policy, stating agreement or disagreement with Church teachings. Ambiguous or unclear statements were not coded. Presenting the data separately on each of these 36 issues would be tedious and confusing, since many were addressed infrequently. Instead, we will present more general trends and examine views on particular issues only when they are noteworthy.

Most opinions clustered around five general areas of conflict. The most frequently discussed dimension dealt with power relations within the Church. This consisted of opinions on the following issues: The status and role of women (including their ordination), the status and role of minorities, the proper role for the laity, questions of academic freedom at Catholic institutions, changes in the

Mass and other liturgical reforms, and appraisals of how the Church has handled dissenters.

A second dimension concerned Church stands on matters of sexual morality. This included opinions on five issue areas: prohibitions of abortion and artificial birth control, clerical celibacy, Church opposition to homosexual activity, and the moral and ethical problems posed by artificial reproductive technologies. A third dimension was constructed to deal with power relations between the Church and State authority. This included opinions in four distinct areas: Questions of public funding for private schools, Church involvement in politics, Church teachings and policies regarding war, and the broader question of the proper separation of church and state.

A fourth dimension dealt with ecumenism and relations among churches. This dimension included opinions on the desirability of Christian unity, obstacles to Christian unity, Catholic-Jewish relations, and relations between the Church and other faiths, especially the various Protestant denominations. The fifth and final dimension concerned various charges of wrongdoing directed at representatives of the Church. Most of these focused on alleged pedophilia by priests. A few stories dealt with how the Church handled sexual violations by the clergy. Other topics included drug abuse by priests and financial irregularities with Church funds.

The most extensive debate was over power relations within the Church. (See table 7) Issues related to authority, control, and dissent made up nearly half (45 percent) of all opinions that appeared on Church doctrine and practices. The great bulk of this debate revolved around the role of women in the Church. The second most frequent object of concentration concerned Church teachings on sexual

morality. These made up just over one in five (22 percent) viewpoints that either criticized or defended Church teaching. Discussions of ecumenism were next in frequency, comprising 13 percent of the total. This point was followed closely by debates of allegedly illegal or immoral behavior by priests or members of the Church hierarchy. These emotionally charged debates accounted for one eighth (12 percent) of all opinions on Church policy and practices. The final category of Church-state relations accounted for about one out of 12 (eight percent) opinions that were voiced.

There was little variation across these news organizations in terms of the issues that were debated, but the exceptions to this pattern were sometimes notable. For example, the television network news shows were more likely to focus on sexual controversies (30 percent of all opinions) and charges of wrongdoing (16 percent) than most other outlets. But the networks' focus on allegations of illegality or immorality finished a distant second behind *USA Today*, which devoted 29 percent of its entire issue debate to this category – a level of coverage proportionately two and one half times as great as the overall average of all other outlets in the study.

POWER RELATIONS IN THE CHURCH

Conflicts over power and authority in any major institution are treated as intrinsically newsworthy. So it is not surprising that the news media would give heavy coverage to issues of power and authority in the Catholic Church. What is surprising is the concentration of such coverage on a single controversy – the status of women in the Church. Out of 159 opinions that either supported current Church structures of authority or urged reforms, nearly eight out of 10 (79 percent) concerned the position of women in the Church. By contrast, the proper role of the laity attracted only four percent of the commentary, as did the role of racial minorities in the Church. The Church's handling of all forms of internal dissent collectively accounted for only one opinion out of every eight (13 percent) that dealt with power relations. As we shall see, this narrow focus of debate over the “politics” of the Church was far more diverse in previous decades.

The concentration of debate on “women’s issues” was nearly matched by the consensus of views expressed on these issues. Three out of four opinions on the role of women in the Church (75 percent) urged change or reform; only one out of four (25 percent) supported current practices. (See table 8) Voices urging reform were nearly unanimous on the television networks (94 percent in favor and only 6 percent opposed). Opinion was nearly as one-sided in the newsmagazines (82 percent favored reform) and *USA Today* (83 percent reformist). For example, in 1994, when the synod of bishops meeting in Rome issued a statement condoning greater authority for women in the Church, short of ordination, Bishop Pfeiffer appeared on ABC to say, “We humbly admit...that there is sexism

in the Church, but we also clearly state that we are against it.” (11/16/94) Another argument for change came from a 1997 *Newsweek* story on a resolution passed by the Catholic Theological Society of America challenging Cardinal Ratzinger’s assertions of papal infallibility on the exclusion of women from the priesthood: “They argue that this practice was followed not out of obedience to ‘the will of Jesus’ but because of a common cultural conviction that ‘women are inferior to men and more easily led astray.’ ...Morally, they claim the church’s duty is to decide women’s ordination based on what is authentically Christian and to discard mere cultural baggage.” (6/16/97)

What little support there was for maintaining the status quo appeared mostly in the pages of the prestige press. *The New York Times* came closest to balanced coverage on the role of women, with 61 percent of opinions urging reform and 39 percent supporting the status quo, followed closely by *The Washington Post* at a 63 percent to 37 percent split. Thus, the *Times* quoted a member of the hierarchy who opposed the growing use of female servers at liturgy: “‘It is my honest opinion that less than 5 percent of the diocese is actively involved in having girls as servers.’ When we hear about it, we send a letter asking him to refrain. ...Should an individual priest be allowed to ban girl servers at his church? The diversity of opinions is not limited to the United States, Father Ginty said, which is why the Pope left the decision up to his bishops. ‘I doubt very much if churches in Eastern Europe, Asia or Africa are interested in female servers.’” (6/12/94)

Apart from the representation of women, a smattering of debate on the role of other groups and the treatment of dissenters produced a fairly even split of opinion. For example, *The Washington Post*

quoted Paul Likoudis, news editor of the *Wanderer*, in opposition to Cardinal Bernardin's efforts to engage in a dialogue with reformers: "He seems to be abdicating the teaching and ruling authority he has for the sake of some ethical dialogue. It's time for sanctions against those who dissent, not dialogue." (8/17/96)

On the other side of this issue was a *Time* article on what the accompanying headline called "suppressing debate." The piece outlined numerous objections to the 1998 apostolic letter "Ad Tuendum Fidem" (For the Defense of the Faith), which restated the Church's positions on such issues as abortion, euthanasia, and the ordination of women. The article cited the case of a theologian who left the priesthood in protest against "the authorities in Rome...silencing all theological reflection and discussion." The reporter concluded, "the Vatican has abandoned the Inquisition, but still deals with what it sees as heresy by forbidding discussion and banning books." (11/2/98)

SEXUALITY AND MORALITY

If gender issues topped the list of controversies covered by the national media in the 1990s, sexual issues were the clear runner-up. This category was also more diverse than the narrowly focused debate over power and authority relations. The debate over abortion accounted for about two out of five (41 percent) opinions in this sphere, the controversy over clerical celibacy for about one third (32 percent), and the debate over birth control about one fifth (19 percent). There was also a smattering of opinion on other issues related to sexuality, such as Church teachings on homosexuality and artificial reproductive technologies.

Debate on these topics was also significantly more balanced than we found with regard to gender issues. (See table 9) Among the sources who commented on Church doctrinal practice, a slight majority of 55 percent were critical, compared to 45 percent who supported the Church. However, this overall balance concealed the first significant difference we found between television and the print media. As noted above, television devoted much greater attention to issues of sexual morality than did newspapers and newsmagazines. We now find that television also provided the most negative portrayal of Church positions on these issues. On television news shows, 70 percent of all comments in this sphere were critical of the Church. By contrast, the print outlets collectively featured more support than criticism of the Church by 55 percent to 45 percent.

The print versus television split was most obvious with regard to the issues of abortion and clerical

celibacy. The abortion issue has long been a lightning rod for the intersection of political controversy and Church doctrine. Perhaps because the two sides are so well defined, the coverage was quite balanced on this topic. In fact, a slight majority (56 percent) of sources supported the Church's position on abortion. On television news, however, nearly two out of three sources (62 percent) criticized Church teachings. Conversely, over two out of three print sources (68 percent) supported Church opposition to abortion.

It should be remembered that we were not examining all coverage of the abortion issue, only that component dealing with the Church's position on it. For example, *ABC World News Tonight* gave airtime to a doctor who, as the reporter put it, "says the Church has no business in setting medical policy" with regard to abortion. The doctor then appeared on screen to assert that abortion decisions should be a matter for a woman and her physician to determine: "Any third party entering the doctor-patient relationship...in my mind, they don't belong." (7/21/98) On the other side of this issue, ABC presented a representative of the Catholic Hospital Association to affirm the Church's role in this decision: "We will do our best to be faithful to who we are, never water down our commitment to life, never water down our commitment to human sexuality and the gift of reproduction." (7/21/98)

The issue of priestly celibacy was often raised in the context of debate over the difficulty in recruiting priests and the consequent shortage of clergy qualified to perform sacramental functions. For example, *ABC World News Tonight* quoted Tim Unsworth of the *National Catholic Reporter*, "If we had a married clergy we would have a surplus of priests in less than ten years." (1/18/98) *The CBS*

Evening News quoted a New Jersey parishioner in a similar vein, “There are many, many wonderful people who would make wonderful priests. I don’t think we should deny them that. God works through a married person, through a women, it doesn’t matter.” (10/4/95)

An article in *Time* magazine discussed this issue at length, presenting the same type of argument as those just noted but also citing a rebuttal from the prominent sociologist Father Andrew Greeley. “Yet some doubt the celibacy rule is responsible for the decline in the priesthood. It was never an easy cross to bear, they point out. Why should it be harder now than it has been throughout much of the church’s 2,000-year history? ‘People say the sexual revolution has made sex more attractive for young men,’ Greeley observes, ‘I say, Give me a break!’” (10/9/95)

Among the major issues on sexual morality, only the debate over birth control produced consistent coverage across all news outlets. The overall coverage was balanced, with 47 percent supporting the Church’s denunciation of artificial methods of birth control and 53 percent challenging this position. For example, *The Washington Post* described a Catholic couple who “see their children as the embodiment of their faith...they embrace John Paul II’s bans on abortion and artificial contraception, which they say are based on the belief that all potential life is precious.” (10/9/95)

On the other side of this issue, *Time* magazine writer Lance Morrow opined, “The Church is simply out to lunch on birth control...Contraception sinlessly heads off the unwelcome pregnancy that might occasion the sin of abortion, that is, the destruction of rudimentary life. Only abstracted celibates and

moral neurotics insist that a pill or condom contravenes the divine design for sex. On the contrary, contraception is an act of moral responsibility perfectly consistent with marital virtue.” (10/3/94)

ECUMENISM

Relations between the Roman Catholic Church and other religions comprised a third significant realm of debate in the media, while attracting less attention than the hot button issues related to power and sexuality. Apart from an occasional piece on Catholic-Jewish relations, the debate clustered around the topic of ecumenical outreach to other Christian faiths. The goal of Christian unity or broader ecumenical outreach was almost always seen as worthwhile. Debate flared as to whether the Church was doing enough to pursue this desirable goal.

For the most part, Church doctrines and practices were criticized as stumbling blocks on the road to Christian unity. (See table 10) A nearly unanimous 89 percent of all sources criticized church doctrines and practices on this ground. In the newsmagazines not a single source defended the Church's ecumenical efforts. *The New York Times* and network news shows each presented only one source favoring the Church's position.

For example, *Newsweek* reported a 1997 speech by Eastern Orthodox Patriarch Bartholomew, which "warned an ecumenical audience that the separation between Catholics and Orthodox was not simply a matter of geography, organizational structure or juridical differences...The patriarch seemed to be saying that the very way in which Catholics experience God – through prayer, the sacraments and doctrine – makes reunion impossible." (11/3/97) A far more benign view of the Catholic Church's ecumenical efforts appeared in a 1994 *Washington Post* story on the opening of diplomatic relations

between the Vatican and Israel. The article described this as “the climax of... negotiations toward healing centuries of bitterness between Catholics and Jews.” Reporter David Hoffman quoted an Israeli official’s hope that the agreement “will help erase antisemitism and encourage the Church to play a more active role against it.” (6/16/94)

CHURCH-STATE RELATIONS

If the Catholic Church was usually criticized for its relations to other religions, it fared considerably better in the debate over Church-state relations. Although discussions of the Church's relations with various levels of government in the United States received the least coverage of any dimension of the issue debate, the debate that did occur balanced criticisms with support for Church positions. (See table 11) This debate ranged from the perennial issue of whether tax revenues should be used to underwrite parochial schools to Church-sponsored public relations campaigns designed to affect public opinion and, at least indirectly, the legislative climate on issues important to the Church.

Overall, 48 percent of all sources supported the Church in its relation with government and 52 percent expressed some criticism. This balance of opinion was uniform across all outlets, with no news organization tilting very far in either direction. For example, a *New York Times* article dealt with charges that Cardinal O'Connor was interfering in the 1996 presidential election campaign by criticizing President Clinton's veto of a bill banning partial-birth abortions. The *Times* quoted New York City Mayor Rudy Giuliani,

“Such direct involvement in politics is not a good idea, because I think it confuses people. I think that religious institutions, including the Catholic Church, have every right to do everything they can to persuade their members and others as to their moral views. That can be done without focusing on a particular political figure, in this case

the President of the United States.” (*New York Times*, April 22, 1996, p.B3)

However, the same article also quoted Cardinal O'Connor's vigorous defense, which included criticism of his critics: “It is a not-so-clever way of trying to muzzle the church. If the church here in New York, the church in Rome or anywhere else were to refrain to (sic) address such crucial issues of public policy simply because an election campaign is being waged, then the church would never be able to address these issues. The church will not be silenced simply because of an election.”

CHARGES OF WRONGDOING

Thus far we have considered what might be called the “issue debate” with regard to media coverage of the Catholic Church. This consists of evaluative statements in the news indicating either criticism or support for Church doctrine and practices. However, there was one major focal point of debate that revolved around questions of right and wrong rather than opinions pro and con. This last area of debate concerned the Church’s response to charges of wrongdoing by its clergy. As we mentioned previously, much of this debate revolved around charges of pedophilia, including allegations against Cardinal Bernardin that were made and later retracted by a former altar boy.

We examined this debate insofar as it addressed the role of the Church as an institution. That is, we did not focus on questions of individual guilt or innocence but rather on the alleged complicity of the Church or the appropriateness of its response to such cases. Even in this relatively narrow context, charges of wrongdoing generated more debate than all issues in Church-state relations and nearly as much as the Church’s relations to other religions. (See table 12) Moreover, media coverage of the Church’s handling of such issues was largely negative. Among all sources who evaluated the Church in such contexts, 70 percent were critical of its responses and only 30 percent were supportive.

There was little variation across news outlets. Only *The Washington Post* provided evenly balanced coverage; all other outlets expressed reproach more often than approval of the Church’s behavior. For example, in 1994 *The New York Times* conducted a poll which found that a majority of Catholics

believed the Church was doing a poor job of handling charges of sexual abuse by priests. A “CBS Evening News” story on the poll quoted Father Richard McBrien of Notre Dame University, “I characterize their behavior as irresponsible and in some cases unconscionable insofar as they’ve turned on the victim.” (5/5/94) Later that year *NBC Nightly News* aired a response to such charges from Bishop Thomas J. Costello, “I think we’re working as honestly and openly on this admitted problem as we can.” (11/14/94) But the nature of this topic lent itself to television’s ability to communicate strong emotions and stories of personal injustice. For example, three years later, NBC aired a segment of an interview with a victim of sexual abuse in which he lamented, “I don’t know what hurts more, the fact that it happened in the first place or the way the Catholic Church handled it.” (7/25/97)

CHARACTERIZING THE CHURCH

The Church is more than the sum of its teachings, just as the news is more than the sum of the opinions that appear in a story. Thus, the media's depiction of the Catholic Church involves not only its presentation of policy issues in which the Church is involved. It also reflects the tone of news which is influenced by the use of descriptive language. For example, the tone of a story might be discursive, sarcastic, or ironic, depending upon the language chosen to convey the same factual information.

The entire journalistic endeavor is an attempt to describe events and ideas that the audience cannot experience directly. It is language (and, in the case of television, pictures) that guides the audience's vicarious experience of the reality that journalism describes. Therefore, our analysis extended to the use of descriptive terms that labeled or characterized the Church and its representatives. In contrast to determining the balance of opinions on particular issues, this represents a means of measuring more general depictions of Catholicism.

We were especially interested in words or phrases that carry emotive, judgmental, or value-laden connotations. To create the list of likely terms, we noted any used of emotive, colorful or judgmental language while performing our initial qualitative analysis of the news. Based on a preliminary qualitative analysis that is described in our previous study (pp. 68-69), we isolated three terminological dimensions of language that characterized the Catholic Church: ideology (liberal vs.

conservative), control (oppressive vs. liberating) and relevance (relevant vs. irrelevant). These dimensions provided a means of measuring media descriptions of ideology in the Church, authority and control in the Church, and the Church's relevance to the modern world. By counting these words or phrases, we were able to assess the balance of descriptive language along the major dimensions on which the Church was characterized. (See table 13)

The ideological dimension noted conservative and liberal terms. On the conservative end were words like "reactionary," "retrogressive," and "traditional," while on the liberal side were "radical," "progressive," and "revolutionary". This dimension came into play most frequently when stories attempted to characterize candidates or new appointees to the hierarchy. The authority dimension separated words according to their characterization of the type of control exercised by the Church. On the "oppressive" end of this spectrum were such terms as "authoritarian" and "rigid"; on the opposite side were terms like "liberating", "unrestrictive", and "emancipating." The relevance dimension identified words that connoted something about the relevance of the Church in the world. Words connoting irrelevance were terms such as "outdated" and "anachronistic". On the opposite end of the spectrum were terms like "relevant" and "in touch".

Rather than count every emotive term that appeared, we measured the balance of such terms in each story. That is, we asked whether an entire story tended to characterize the church mainly as liberal or conservative, liberating or oppressive, relevant or out of touch. Following previous scholarship, we adhered to a "two to one rule" in making this judgment. If twice as many words were drawn from

one end of a dimension as from the other, the story was coded as tilted in that direction.

IDEOLOGY

We identified 56 stories, about one out of every ten in the sample, that labeled the Church or its leaders as liberal or conservative. Such descriptions were most likely to appear in *The New York Times* (20 stories), followed by the newsmagazines (14), and the television networks (13). They were least likely to appear in *The Washington Post* (only seven stories) and *USA Today* (only twice). Regardless of the outlet, ideological characterizations of the Church usually emphasized its conservatism. Depictions of the Church's conservatism outnumbered those emphasizing its liberalism by nearly a four to one margin – 79 percent to 21 percent.

The tilt was most pronounced in the newsmagazines (93 percent conservative characterizations) and the network news shows (85 percent). For example, a 1994 *Time* magazine article speculating on who might be the next pope downplayed the chances of Cardinal Martini because “the conservative College of Cardinals is not likely to look kindly upon even a moderate member of an order [the Jesuits] with a reputation for liberalism.” (12/26/94)

AUTHORITY

Stories that characterized the church in terms of its authority structure usually emphasized its oppressive or authoritarian character. These kinds of depictions appeared nearly as frequently as did references to the conventional liberal-conservative ideological spectrum, appearing in 49 stories overall. The characterizations were almost as one-sided, with 78 percent referring to the oppressive

nature of the church and only 22 percent the liberating or emancipatory aspects of membership. Once again, the newsmagazines led in such characterizations with 11 depictions of the Church as authoritarian and none as liberating. The tilt was similar but less pronounced at other news outlets.

The precise terms were frequently more pointed or colorful than the straightforward conservative vs. liberal terms applied to the ideological spectrum. For example, a *Time* article on Pope John Paul referred to him in the subhead as an “autocrat,” and noted that liberal Catholics “see him as the product of a conservative, patriarchal church, which helps explain his increasingly autocratic and negative pronouncements...these critics charge John Paul rules with an iron hand...” An even more pointed depiction appeared in a *New York Times Sunday Magazine* article written by Father Andrew Greeley. Father Greeley wrote, “The Church is resolutely authoritarian, bishops and priests are authoritarian and insensitive.” (The point of Father Greeley’s article was to show why Catholics remain in the Church despite such institutional failings.) (6/10/94)

Among the rare instances of the church being characterized as liberating rather than oppressing the individual was a profile of lay missionaries for Maryknoll, who worked with the rural poor in Mexico. The article quoted on “missioner,” as they call themselves: “Maryknoll missionaries go overseas to work with poor people and help them build a profound experience of church that is important to their lives and helps empower them to reclaim their God-given dignity. That’s a lot of different than beating people over the head with the Gospels and telling them to believe in Jesus Christ.” (1/11/98)

RELEVANCE

Compared to the domains of ideology of authority, characterizations of the Church's relevance proved rare. As we note below, such was not always the case. In previous decades, the Church's relevance to contemporary life was a more common focus of media characterization. Hence its inclusion in our study. In the 1990s, however, only 11 stories in the sample characterized the Church along this dimension, less than one-quarter as frequently as characterizations of the Church's ideology and authority. Moreover, when such terms did appear, the results cut against the kind of terminology found most frequently in the other dimensions, which stressed its conservatism and even authoritarianism.

TRENDS IN COVERAGE OVER TIME

How did the media's treatment of the Catholic Church in the 1990s compare to coverage from earlier decades? What continuities and changes did our research uncover in the Church's media image since Vatican II? To answer these questions, we made direct comparisons of our current findings with those of our previous study.

The two studies employed the same content analysis system and were conducted by the same researchers. The only difference lay in our broadening of the study's scope to include several additional media outlets in the 1990s. To insure that all comparisons were appropriate, we restricted our long-term analysis to the four news organizations that were examined in both studies – *Time*, CBS, *The New York Times*, and *The Washington Post*. In the analysis that follows, when we refer to results from the 1990s, the conclusions are based on these four outlets alone.

AMOUNT OF COVERAGE

Coverage of Catholicism continued to decline during the 1990s, as it has in every decade since the 1960s. (See table 14) The 2,654 news items we identified from 1994 through 1998 represent a drop of 44 percent from the 4,691 items we counted from 1964 through 1968. In fact, this calculation understates the full decline in coverage. The 1960s total excludes CBS, because television news broadcasts were not yet archived.

However, most of this falloff occurred soon after the 1960s, when the sweeping reforms of Vatican II generated heavy press coverage. The coverage plummeted from an average of 938 items per year during the 1960s to only 554 per year during the 1970s. Since then the decline has been much more gradual, to 544 news items annually during the 1980s and 531 during the 1990s. Suffice it to say that the major media's much-noted resurgence of interest in religion and spirituality during the current decade has not extended to the Catholic Church.

Continuing declines in coverage at three of the four outlets were partially offset by an increase in coverage at *The New York Times* – the only increase at any outlet throughout the entire four decades of the study. The *Times* devoted 1,778 articles to the Church during the 1990s study period, up 30 percent from its 1,370 total during the comparable 1980s time period (but still down 37 percent from its peak of 2,840 articles during the 1960s). By contrast, *Time* published only 30 relevant stories during the most recent study period, down an astounding 80 percent from its 1960s total of 146 stories. *Washington Post* coverage was down 54 percent over the same period, and CBS was down 45 percent from its 1970s totals.

TOPICS

The 1990s saw some continuity but also significant shifts in topical focus as compared to the previous decades. (See table 15) Church happenings once again headed the top ten list of topics, accounting for more than a quarter of all news items reported. Similarly, news about the Pope finished second on the list, just as it has ever since the 1970s, with 45 mentions. This shows a distinct pattern of

coverage over time that defines the Church primarily in terms of its leadership and its institutional activities. It also illustrates the media's tendency to cover the Church much like other major institutions, such as business, government or interest groups, by reporting those official positions and events by which the institution defines itself.

But a significant new topic also appeared for the first time in the current study. Crimes committed by clerics – chiefly involving pedophilia – took the number three spot, accounting for one out of every 12 topics reported. Much of this coverage revolved around sexual abuse charges lodged against Cardinal Bernardin, which generated heavy publicity before they were retracted. But charges of sexual improprieties by priests, both homosexual and heterosexual in nature, became an ongoing story that transcended any particular case.

Another new topic on the top ten list concerned changes in the Church's population. These stories focused on the loss of members to other faiths, the continuing decline of priests and women religious, and the increase of Hispanic immigrants. The relation between religion and science also made the list for the first time. This topic focused on the general issue of tensions between science and faith, as well as the Church's position on evolving technologies of artificial reproduction.

Conversely, one notable change was the declining coverage of dissent within the Church, which fell from fourth to eighth place in the 1990s. One possible explanation for this shift was the lack of an individual lightning rod such as, Father Charles Curran. Alternatively, dissatisfied Church members

may have left the Church or those dissenters who remained declined to speak out for fear of official discipline.

Other key topics from the past – civil rights, birth control, education, and relations with other religions – failed to make the top ten list in the current decade, although such issues continue to receive general coverage as general news topics. What has changed is that the Church has become only one of several focal points of news about these issues. For example, while private education still commands media attention, the growth of non-Catholic Christian academies has shifted the focus of such stories away from Catholic parochial schools. Many other groups, both secular and religious, have stolen some of the Church's thunder on subjects such as birth control, abortion and homosexuality. And while the Church helped lead the battle for racial integration in decades past, racial progress has diminished its role in that debate.

SOURCES

The balance of sources quoted by the media also changed in the 1990s (See table 16), as the gap between Catholic and non-Catholic sources shrank from previous decades. While a majority of 58 percent were Catholic in our most recent sample, this was far less than the 70 percent we calculated in previous decades. This confirms our prior finding that the Church must compete for the media's attention with other groups that share some of its views on politically relevant topics, such as Protestant organizations that make up the so-called Christian Right. As long as reporters can quote some representative of a particular position (e.g. anti-abortion), they may not feel obliged to include

a statement from the Church. In addition, researchers, professors and scholars who are not identified as Catholic increased their representation among outside sources.

Among Catholic sources, the Church hierarchy continued to dominate in the coverage, although its visibility declined slightly (to 44 percent in the 1990s, vs. 55 percent previously). Priests and women religious fell from second to third place, while the laity gained in prominence. Lay Catholics jumped from third to second place in the 1990s, and their share among all Catholic sources more than doubled, from 13 percent in past decades to 31 percent in the current decade. Among the declining proportion of priests and religious quoted in news accounts, the majority (62 percent) were males, solidifying a predominantly male presence among Catholic sources. The changing face of Catholicism in the media probably reflects two trends: The shrinking ranks of priests and religious, many of whom have left their positions, died or retired, and the increased presence of lay Catholics assuming some of the functions once performed by clergy.

Among non-Catholic sources, representatives of state and local governments held a slight edge over the leaders from other churches who headed the list in decades past. Federal officials took third place on the most recent list, dropping a notch from our earlier study. This trend reflects the local focus of the school prayer and voucher debates, as well as the prosecution of priests charged with criminal behavior in state and local jurisdictions. Other related discussions include the issue of whether specific local or state politicians – like mayors or governors – can express opinions that contradict the Church and still be considered Catholic.

In addition to general groups of sources, we also analyzed the prominence of particular individuals in the news. (See table 17) As in previous decades, coverage was dominated by the Church hierarchy, especially the Pope. In the 1990s, John Paul II received 90 citations, more than four times the amount of any other source. This reflects not only his position as head of the Church but his many foreign trips, which are natural news events, as well as his facility with the media. With the exception of novelist-sociologist Andrew Greeley, bishops, archbishops and cardinals comprised the major voices of the Church. Among them, Cardinal O'Connor and the late Cardinal Bernardin topped the list, each receiving more than twice the coverage of any other prince of the Church. In contrast to previous decades, Father Charles Curran was notably absent from the recent list. This change reflects the decline in coverage relating to doctrinal dissent, which Father Curran symbolized.

PRESENTING CHURCH TEACHINGS

Another recent shift in coverage involved the question of whether stories presented the Church's official position. (See table 18) In fact the current decade contained the highest proportion of stories noting the Church's position, fully 56 percent compared to the low of 37 percent in the 1980s, 40 percent in the 1970s, and 43 percent in the 1960s. This reflects trends we already noted – the dominance of the official Church among Catholic sources, the diminished voice of dissenters, and the media's tendency to cover the Church as an institution by reporting its official position.

However, the fact that the Church's position was noted did not mean that it went unchallenged. Out of 224 stories that stated the Church's position in the 1990s, fewer than half (46 percent) simply

stated doctrine or announcements without additional comment, about the same proportion as in the past. (See table 19) In the remaining 54 percent of stories, the Church's position was challenged with roughly equal frequency from internal critics and those outside the Church. This represents a shift from our initial study, when dissent was more than three times as likely to come from internal than external sources (39 percent verses 11 percent.)

The level of consensus was even greater in stories where the clergy expressed their views. In this category, nearly four in five stories (79 percent) generated no debate, a substantial increase over the two in five items from the past. In earlier times, critics of the clergy's positions were about twice as likely to originate inside the Church (23 percent versus 12 percent). More recently, criticism was equally divided between internal and external sources, with each accounting for just under 10 percent of all views expressed by the clergy. Thus, the decline of publicized dissent from within the Church was counterbalanced by an increase in criticism from without.

DEBATING CHURCH DOCTRINE AND PRACTICE

We also examined the relative frequency of debate on Church positions by each time period for this study. (See table 20) The analysis confirmed the temporary rise in coverage of dissent during the 1980s, as we noted in our previous discussion of topics. Fully 58 percent of stories during that decade featured debate on Church positions. In contrast, fewer than half the stories on this subject from the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s noted controversy over official Catholic teachings and pronouncements.

The 1990s brought a major change in the focus of debate. (See table 21) Media attention shifted away from issues of Church teachings involving sexual morality (such as abortion, birth control, and priestly celibacy), which had generated continuous debate ever since Vatican II. The proportion of opinions expressed on such issues dropped by almost half, from 30 percent during the 1960s through the 1980s to 16 percent in the 1990s.

Conversely, the proportion of opinions expressed on the structure of power and authority within the Church nearly doubled, from 22 percent to 42 percent in the same time periods. This increase was entirely due to the increasingly heated debate over the role of women in the Church. Even as earlier debates over the role of racial minorities and the laity faded from view, these issues were replaced by criticism of the patriarchal nature of the hierarchy and arguments over the ordination of women. This single-issue focus catapulted the general topic of the distribution of power from the third most heavily debated area in past decades to the number one source of controversy in the 1990s.

Two other areas of controversy also gained a higher profile during the 1990s. First, debate over ecumenism rose from 13 to 23 percent of all opinions expressed. This reflects renewed attention to Catholic-Jewish relations on topics ranging from the Church's activities with regard to the Holocaust to the canonization of Edith Stein. Second, viewpoints on Church-State relations doubled from 5 to 10 percent of all opinions expressed. Increased debate in this area reflects the phenomenon of Catholic politicians (such as Senator Edward Kennedy) making news by opposing Church positions, as well as the Church's direct engagement with political issues such as abortion and euthanasia.

Finally, an area of controversy that emerged afresh in the 1990s was that of wrongdoing by representatives of the Church. As noted above, debate over the Church's role in dealing with wrongdoing (as opposed to purely individual culpability) had arisen too infrequently to be accorded separate treatment in our earlier study. During the current decade, by contrast, this highly charged area accounted for one out of every 14 opinions (7 percent) expressed on all controversial areas. Even so, it was relatively less prominent as a source of debate than as a purely topical focus of news.

Viewpoints on sexual morality were almost perfectly balanced between support for and opposition to Church teachings during the 1990s. This pattern has remained constant ever since the 1970s. (See table 22) Only in the 1960s did Church teachings stimulate widespread opposition in the media, with two out of three sources voicing opposition. Much of criticism of that time was in response to Church teachings forbidding the use of artificial methods of contraception. During the 1990s, viewpoints on birth control were relatively balanced (45 percent positive and 55 percent negative toward Church teachings). The Church's position on abortion actually received fairly strong support, with 61 percent positive and only 39 percent negative comments. The heaviest criticism was reserved for the policy of priestly celibacy, which was supported by only 36 percent of sources and opposed by 64 percent. Yet even this distribution of opinion was slightly more favorable to the Church than our results from previous decades, which produced a combined 27 percent support and 73 percent opposition.

Despite the newfound prominence of this debate, views on the Church power structure also remained

steady over time. (See table 23) Two out of three sources (66 percent) favored reform during the 1960s and 1970s, a proportion that dropped to 60 percent in the 1980s, but rose again to 71 percent in the 1990s. Despite this consistency in the tone of this debate, the amount of debate increased after the 1960s, as many stories presented sources wrestling with the implications of Vatican II reforms. As noted above, by the 1990s the number of viewpoints evaluating the Church power structure was more than double that of the 1960s. Thus, reformers became more prominent in the news, if not more dominant.

The 1990s saw a decided shift in coverage of how the Church treats various groups. As noted above, this debate concentrated almost entirely on the role of women. Seventy percent of viewpoints favored changing the status of women up from 56 percent in previous decades. Many of the criticisms came from sources favoring women's ordination, as well as those expressing more general dissatisfaction with the Church's treatment of women. Topics such as Church treatment of minorities and the laity were debated too infrequently in the '90s to draw comparisons with previous decades.

While viewpoints on the need for change in the Church remained fairly constant over the four decades covered by this study, there were some significant shifts among individual media outlets. About two-thirds of views in *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* advocated change, echoing the trend of previous decades. But in *Time*, approval of reform jumped from 63 percent in previous decades to 82 percent in the current decade. All views recently expressed on CBS favored change,

compared to two out of five in previous decades. However, the number of opinions expressed was very low, rendering comparisons over time statistically meaningless.

There was also a notable shift on the Church's role in promoting religious unity. (See table 24) Among those expressing explicit opinions on this issue, three quarters viewed the Church as an obstacle to the union of different faiths, compared to half of all opinions expressed in the past. Current conflict focused mainly on Catholic-Jewish relations, specifically the Church's limited admission of guilt during the Holocaust, as well as the controversy caused by the canonization of Jewish-born nun Edith Stein.

The two remaining areas of debated were not relevant in this comparison. The distribution of viewpoints on the Church's involvement in politics differed little from the pattern we observed during the previous decade, but so few opinions were expressed in the four outlets as to render comparisons meaningless. In the case of the Church's response to wrongdoing by its representatives, data were not collected prior to the 1990s.

CHARACTERIZING THE CHURCH

Finally, in the case of terminological characterizations of the Church, differences appeared over time in both frequency and tone. In the case of ideological labeling, while the split remained consistent over time – with about two-thirds of stories calling the Church conservative versus one-third that called it liberal – the overall use of such labels fell significantly. (See table 25) Despite our use of

more rigorous data collection techniques now available through computerized word pattern searches, only 36 stories in the 1990s were found to portray the Church as conservative or liberal, compared to 95 in the 1980s. The media was over three times more likely to present such labels in the 1960s (127 stories), when ideological tags were most frequently employed.

There was a similar decline in the tendency to label the Church as either an oppressive or liberating institution. (See table 26) The use of such terms dropped from 40 stories in the 1980s to 24 stories in the 1990s. The same pattern occurred from the '60s to the '70s, when such stories fell from 46 to 29, before rebounding in the '80s. Critics were more likely to call the Church oppressive in the last two decades of this study. All relevant stories in the '80s and '90s contained language critical of the Church's control of its members, versus about three quarters of such stories in the '60s and '70s. Roughly a quarter of stories presented the Church as liberating during those decades, an image that has virtually disappeared since 1980.

Ever since Vatican II, theologians, lay Catholics and non-Catholics have vigorously debated the modern relevance of this 2000- year-old institution. Still, the prominence of this terminology in news stories fell from a high of 32 stories in the 1960s to only 11 stories in the current decade. (See table 27) But even as coverage declined, as we noted earlier, its tone became more positive. In the 1990s, over 90 percent called the Church relevant to contemporary concerns. In earlier decades, verbiage portraying the Church as a relevant institution represented a distinct minority of all characterizations. Ironically, characterizations of the Church's relevance themselves became less relevant to the

coverage, even as they became more positive in tone.

By contrast, ten stories described the Church as relevant and only one as irrelevant to contemporary life. For example, on the fiftieth anniversary of Pope John Paul II's ordination as a priest, *USA Today* interviewed a theologian at Georgetown University, asking him how the Roman Catholic Church had changed since the Pope was ordained. He replied, "The Church is very different today...the Second Vatican Council helped to update the Church to face the issues of the modern world. ...The Church is much more concerned with social justice. It's more ecumenical." (11/1/96)

CONCLUSION

The twin goals of this study were to understand how the national media have portrayed the Catholic Church in the 1990s and to interpret the results within the context of long-term trends in the Church's media image. To accomplish this, we examined several dimensions of news coverage by nine nationally influential print and broadcast news organizations. These dimensions included the news topics, the sources who were cited, the presentation of Church teachings, the debates over controversies in which the Church was involved, and the descriptive language that was employed to characterize the Church.

These elements of news stories were subjected to a scientific content analysis of the broadcast network evening newscasts, the leading weekly news magazines, and the most nationally influential general interest newspapers from 1994 through 1998. The results were compared to those from our earlier study of media coverage from the 1960s through the 1980s, with direct comparisons of coverage in the four news outlets included in both the current and previous studies – the *New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Time* magazine, and the CBS evening news.

The results demonstrate the persistence of several long-term trends in the coverage, while highlighting some distinguishing characteristics of the national media's current portrayal of the Catholic Church. Among the long-term trends across the past four decades were: (1) declining coverage; (2) a focus on a few broad areas of controversy (these included power relations within the Church, teachings on

sexual morality, and the Church's relation to the political system and to other religions); and (3) a preference for critics who contend that the Church needs to be more inclusive toward its own constituencies, such as women and minorities, and toward other religions.

The 1990s were distinguished by a concentrated focus on debate over the role of women in the Church, with a corresponding shift away from such long-running debates as abortion, birth control, and the treatment of doctrinal dissenters. The voices of internal dissenters were increasingly replaced in the news by those of external critics. Equally significant was the unprecedented level of attention given to charges of criminal behavior by clerics, with particular emphasis on charges of pedophilia and sexual abuse. The topical focus on this explosive subject was accompanied by heavy criticism of the Church's institutional response to charges of individual wrongdoing.

The opinion debate over Church teachings and activities also changed during the 1990s. In previous decades debate had centered around Church doctrines with regard to sexual morality. Authority issues played a secondary role and encompassed several controversies, including the appropriate roles of the laity, women, homosexuals, and racial minorities. During the current decade, debate coalesced around the role of women. This included both questions of ordination and the general status of women in the church.

The new prominence of women's rights issues was especially important to overall perceptions of the Church, because this proved to be an area in which the media debate was sharply tilted in favor of

change. In contrast to such contentious issues as sexual morality and Church-state relations, on which opinion was roughly balanced, three out of four sources supported reforms that would give more authority to women. Opinions were equally critical of the Church's relations with other religions. Overall, current Church teachings or practices received less support in the 1990s than they had in the previous decade.

Finally, although the Church continued to be described primarily in terms connoting ideological conservatism and oppressiveness, the use of such terms declined markedly from previous decades.

But this decline also meant that the Church was rarely characterized in terms of its relevance to contemporary life. When such depictions did appear, they were more likely to portray the Church as relevant, in contrast to previous decades.

On the whole, national media coverage of the Catholic Church in the 1990s continued to treat it primarily within a framework of political news. This applied to both its external relations to political issues and institutions and its internal authority structures. As it has over the past four decades, the coverage again emphasized the need for the Church to adapt to the more egalitarian and democratic norms and procedures that characterize the secular institutions of American society. In the 1990s this perspective focused mainly on the Church's treatment of women and heightened attention to clerical wrongdoing. As we found in our earlier study, this was not matter of overtly opinionated or muckraking coverage. It would be more accurate to see it as the reflection of the prism through which one institution – the media – views another with very different norms and traditions.

TABLE 1
TOTAL NUMBER OF NEWS ITEMS

Television		216
ABC	77	
CBS	69	
NBC	70	
Magazines		67
Time	30	
Newsweek	21	
US News & World Report	16	
Newspapers*		2820
The New York Times	1778	
The Washington Post	777	
USA Today	265	
Total		3103

* The study analyzed a 10 percent random sample of newspaper articles.

TABLE 2
LEADING TOPICS

Topic	Number of Stories	Percentage
Church Happenings	239	34
News of the Pope	99	14
Crimes by Clerics	58	8
Church in Politics	45	6
Changing Church Population	35	5
Canon Law	35	5
Abortion	33	5
Church and Science	27	4
Relations with Other Religions	24	3
Women's Issues	21	3
Dissent in Church	20	3
Education	16	2

TABLE 3
SOURCES CITED

Source	Number	Percentage
Church Hierarchy	571	26
Lay Catholics	386	17
Priests and Religious	207	9
Catholic Schools	102	5
Other	32	1
Total Catholic Sources	1310	58%
Leaders of Other Churches	108	5
Religious Scholars	104	5
Federal Government	86	4
State/Local Governments	86	4
Other	548	24
Total Non-Catholic Sources	932	42%
Total Sources	2242	100%

TABLE 4
LEADING INDIVIDUAL SOURCES CITED

	Number of Citations
Pope John Paul II	90
Cardinal O'Connor	21
Cardinal Bernardin	20
Father Andrew Greeley	11
Cardinal Law	9
Cardinal Mahoney	9
Cardinal Keeler	8
Cardinal Ratzinger	7
Cardinal Hickey	4
Pope Pius XII	4
Bishop Pilla	4

TABLE 5
PRESENTATION OF CHURCH POSITION BY OUTLET

	Official Doctrine	Clergy Position	No Position	Total	Number of Stories
ABC	49	30	21	100%	77
CBS	52	28	20	100%	69
NBC	47	33	20	100%	70
Time	77	13	10	100%	30
Newsweek	62	14	24	100%	21
US News & World Report	75	12.5	12.5	100%	16
USA Today	74	11	15	100%	27
The Washington Post	70	18	13	100%	79
The New York Times	50	31	19	100%	180
Total	56	26	18	100%	569

TABLE 6
DEBATE OF CHURCH POSITIONS

	No Debate	Internal Debate	External Critics	Total*	Number of Stories
ABC	55	13	32	100%	38
CBS	61	19	19	100%	36
NBC	73	9	18	100%	33
Time	35	26	39	100%	23
Newsweek	38	31	31	100%	13
US News & World Report	42	50	8	100%	12
USA Today	45	10	45	100%	20
The Washington Post	35	29	36	100%	55
The New York Times	58	17	26	100%	90
Total	52	20	28	100%	320

*May not sum to 100% due to rounding.

TABLE 7
AREAS OF DEBATE (PERCENT OF OPINIONS)

	TV News	Magazines	USA Today	The Washington Post	The New York Times	All Outlets
Power Structures	37	49	29	51	48	45
Sexual Morality	30	15	24	26	14	22
Ecumenism	8	20	4	8	18	13
Wrongdoing	16	8	29	10	9	12
Church-State	9	8	14	5	11	8
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Opinions	100	78	21	77	81	357

TABLE 8
VIEWPOINTS ON ROLE OF WOMEN IN THE CHURCH

	TV News	Magazines	USA Today	The Washington Post	The New York Times	All Outlets
Criticize Church	94	82	83	63	61	75
Support Church	6	18	17	37	39	25
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Opinions	33	34	6	30	23	126

TABLE 9
VIEWPOINTS ON CHURCH TEACHINGS ON SEXUAL
MORALITY

	TV News	Magazines	USA Today	The Washington Post	The New York Times	All Outlets
Criticize	70	50	40	55	20	55
Support	30	50	60	45	80	45
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Opinions	30	12	5	20	10	77

TABLE 10
VIEWPOINTS ON CHURCH'S ECUMENICAL ROLE

	TV News	Magazines	USA Today	The Washington Post	The New York Times	All Outlets
Church is Obstacle	86	100	0	60	91	89
Church is No Obstacle	14	0	0	40	9	11
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Opinions	7	13	0	5	11	36

TABLE 11
VIEWPOINTS ON CHURCH'S INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICS

	TV News	Magazines	USA Today	The Washington Post	The New York Times	All Outlets
Appropriate	44	67	0	50	56	48
Inappropriate	56	33	100	50	44	52
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Opinions	9	6	3	4	9	31

TABLE 12
VIEWPOINTS ON CHURCH'S HANDLING OF CHARGES OF
WRONGDOING

	TV News	Magazines	USA Today	The Washington Post	The New York Times	All Outlets
Support	31	17	33	50	14	30
Criticize	69	83	67	50	86	70
	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Opinions	16	6	6	8	7	43

TABLE 13
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE CHURCH

Ideology		Authority		Relevance	
Liberal	21	Empowering	22	Relevant	91
Conservative	79	Oppressive	78	Irrelevant	9
	100%		100%		100%
Number of Stories	56	Number of Stories	49	Number of Stories	11

TABLE 14
TOTAL NUMBER OF STORIES FOR EACH OUTLET
BY DECADE
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s	Total
CBS	1960	126	105	69	300
Time	146	70	43	30	289
The Washington Post*	1705	1265	1200	777	4947
The New York Times*	2840	1310	1370	1778	7298
Total	4691	2771	2718	2654	12,834
Annual Average	938	554	544	531	

* A random sample of 10 percent of newspaper articles were selected for the content analysis.

TABLE 15
TOP TEN TOPICS BY DECADE
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	Number of Stories	Percentage of Stories
1960s		
Church Happenings	238	31
Birth Control	106	14
Changes in Canon Law	95	12
Relations with Other Religions	82	11
Dissent within the Church	81	11
Education	68	9
Civil Rights	53	7
News of the Pope	46	6
Vietnam War	41	5
Economic Issues	30	4
1970s		
Church Happenings	161	28
News of the Pope	112	19
Abortion	57	10
Relations with Other Religions	46	8
Education	43	7
Church in Politics	40	7
Women in Church	39	7

Changes in Cannon Law	33	6
Crimes by Clerics	21	4
Dissent within the Church	20	3
1980s		
Church Happenings	152	29
News of the Pope	71	14
Dissent within the Church	63	12
Relations with Other Religions	48	9
Abortion	41	8
Education	39	7
Economic Issues	37	7
Church and Politics	36	7
Women in the Church	27	5
Homosexuality	21	4
1990s		
Church Happenings	131	26
News of the Pope	42	8
Crimes by Clerics	39	8
Sex Crimes	(32)	(6)
Church and Politics	24	5
Canon Law	22	4
Changing Church Populations	21	4
Abortion	21	4
Dissent within the Church	18	4
Church and Science	16	3

Media Coverage of the Catholic Church 1963-1998

Women in the Church	16	3
Relations with Other Religions	15	3
Education	15	3

TABLE 16
SOURCES CITED IN STORIES ABOUT THE CATHOLIC
CHURCH IN THE 1990S
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	Number of Citations
Church Hierarchy	398
Lay Catholics	279
Priests and Religious	139
Catholic Schools	22
Catholic Media	19
Catholic Dissidents	3
Total Catholic Sources	860
Leaders of Other Churches	70
Federal Government	62
State/Local Government	74
Foreign Government	14
Abortion Rights Groups	11
Anti-abortion Groups	14
All Others	3959
Total Non-Catholic Sources	4204

TABLE 17
LEADING INDIVIDUAL SOURCES CITED IN THE 1990s
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	Number of Citations
Pope John Paul II	56
John Cardinal O'Connor	14
Joseph Cardinal Bernardin	10
Father Andrew Greeley	8
Roger Cardinal Mahoney	7
Archbishop Bernard Law	6
Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger	6
William Cardinal Keeler	6
Bishop Anthony Pilla	3
Archbishop Rembert Weakland	3
James Cardinal Hickey	3

TABLE 18
PRESENTATION OF CHURCH POSITION BY DECADE

	1960s	1970s	1980s	1990s
Church Position Presented	43	40	37	56
Catholic Clergy Position Presented	31	32	44	26
No Position	26	28	19	18
	100%	100%	100%	100%
Number of Stories	763	648	465	358

TABLE 19
PRESENTATION OF DEBATE IN STORIES IDENTIFYING
CHURCH POSITION IN THE 1990s
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	Church Position	Clergy View	No View
No Debate	46	79	83
Internal Debate	25	10	8
Other Critics	29	11	9
	100%	100%	100%
Number of Stories	224	96	63

TABLE 20
DEBATE OF CHURCH POSITIONS BY DECADE

	Debate	No Debate		
	% of Stories	% of Stories		Number of Stories
1960s	49	51	100%	335
1970s	43	57	100%	233
1980s	58	42	100%	195
1990s	45	55	100%	354

TABLE 21
AREAS OF DEBATE
PERCENT OF VIEWPOINT ON CHURCH POSITIONS
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	1990s	1960s - 1980s
Power Structures	42	22
Ecumenism	23	13
Sexual Morality	16	30
Church-State	12	5
Charges of Wrongdoing	7	—

TABLE 22
VIEWPOINTS ON SEXUAL MORALITY BY DECADE

	Support	Criticize		
	Percent of Views	Percent of Views		Number of Opinions
1960s	36	64	100%	132
1970s	56	44	100%	52
1980s	52	48	100%	65
1990s	51	49	100%	47

TABLE 23
VIEWPOINTS ON THE CHURCH POWER STRUCTURE BY
DECADE
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	Favor Change	Favor Status Quo		Number of Opinions
1960s	66	34	100%	38
1970s	66	34	100%	71
1980s	60	40	100%	75
1990s	71	29	100%	78

TABLE 24
VIEWPOINTS ON THE CHURCH'S ECUMENICAL ROLE
FOUR COMPARISON OUTLETS ONLY

	Positive	Negative		Number of Opinions
1960s - 1980s	50	50	100%	24
1990s	25	75	100%	24

TABLE 25
IDEOLOGICAL CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE CHURCH
BY DECADE

	"Conservative"	"Liberal"		Number of Stories
1960s	59	41	100%	127
1970s	66	34	100%	77
1980s	65	35	100%	95
1990s	67	33	100%	36

TABLE 26
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF CHURCH CONTROL BY
DECADE

	"Oppressive"	"Liberating"		Number of Stories
1960s	76	24	100%	46
1970s	79	21	100%	29
1980s	100	0	100%	40
1990s	96	4	100%	24

TABLE 27
CHARACTERIZATIONS OF THE RELEVANCE OF THE
CHURCH BY DECADE

	"Irrelevant"	"Relevant"		Number of Stories
1960s	66	34	100%	32
1970s	60	40	100%	10
1980s	80	20	100%	15
1990s	0	100	100%	6