

## **Catholic News**

**By Fr. Michel de Verteuil**

June Johnston and I have been editors of the Catholic News for nine years. This is a very small part of its 108-year history, but from the time we began working with the paper we became aware that we were inheritors of a tradition and must work within it even when we made innovations.

The most important thing we learnt was that the Catholic News is a community paper - it belongs to the members of the Church. This comes out in various ways, distribution for example. The paper is printed around midday on a Thursday and by Friday evening or at latest Saturday morning it is in every one of the 61 parishes of the Archdiocese, and also in Grenada and St Vincent, and yet we have just one paid distributor.

The rest of the distribution is all done by volunteers. They collect their papers at various fixed points, most of them on their way home from work, and drop them off in their parishes, sometimes via a neighbour's or a friend's home. They do it unobtrusively, week by week, for the fifty-two weeks of the year. We at the office hardly know how the work gets done; we only get involved on the rare occasions when there is a hitch.

It is the same with those who sell Catholic News in parish churches. When we celebrated the centenary of the paper in 1992, we thought we would invite those who had been selling Catholic News for 25 years but we found there were too many! We extended it to 35 but most did not want any fuss made about them. They were simply making their contribution to the Church.

The Catholic News office itself belongs to the people. They come in for business, but also for a chat about Church affairs. The phone too is for enquiries of all kinds. What time is Mass at so-and-so parish? How can I get in touch with Father so and so? When is Easter next year? How come so and so is happening in our parish? We can't complain - the office is theirs!

The Catholic News is part of the Catholic identity in our Archdiocese. For many years, supporting it was an obligation like supporting one's parish. When you went to church on a Sunday you brought two sums of money, one for the collection and one for the Catholic News.

The Catholic News is a religious community paper. Some years ago we invited a professor of journalism from Ireland to help us improve the paper. He helped us tremendously but he couldn't understand why we included the Sunday Mass texts, the list of liturgical readings for the week and sermons at Laventille and elsewhere. I had to explain to him that for many Church members, the Catholic News is like a prayer book.

This has a downside which is that readers get indignant if we make a mistake with these texts. It is as if we have disturbed their prayer life.

So too if we don't include some feature they are accustomed to. Some weeks ago a friend of mine phoned to complain that we hadn't published the text of that month's Laventille sermon. He read it every month and we had deprived him of this spiritual nourishment. Another reader asked if we could let him have the entire text of the Laventille sermon. We had said it was an "edited version" and he felt he was being cheated.

People in North America and Europe go to bookstores to find spiritual or theological nourishment. Our Catholic people will not do that; it is not our culture. But they will read the Catholic News.

This of course constitutes a responsibility for us as editors. Our material must be deep because it is the only spiritual and theological nourishment our people get. I always have in my mind's eye an elderly person in Moruga or Toco poring over the Catholic News, and I don't want to let him or her down.

This is the reason for our Spiritual Reading column which comprises extracts from the writings of some of the great mystics of our Church. It is always gratifying to us, when people of every social class tell us how much they appreciate the column. We feel privileged to have opened up this world of Catholic mysticism for them.

The eulogies also bring out the role of the Catholic News as a community paper. We see them as our local Lives of the Saints, ordinary men and women of our country who would not be mentioned in the secular press but who have been real heroes of faith. When relatives come into the office to bring a eulogy, we welcome them like family. Sometimes they ask if they have to pay, and we always answer, 'of course not, this is family!'

Since the Catholic News is a community paper we welcome contributions from all members of our Church and events from every part of the archdiocese. We make a special effort to encourage stories from the rural parishes. Here again ours is often the only paper where they will get a mention.

This causes problems from time to time, because the quality of writing and of photographs is not always up to mark and yet the paper must be of high quality, something that the community can be proud of. Most people are happy to let us bring their contribution to our standards.

A similar tension arises with the teaching put forward in the Catholic News. It must represent the entire spectrum of our local Church and yet it must be clearly within the Catholic tradition, following the spirit of the Second Vatican Council. As editors we must therefore be selective in the material we publish; we cannot accept everything sent us. Our readers must have the confidence that whatever appears in the paper is in accord with the official teaching of the Church. We try our best to be faithful to the words of St Augustine on the masthead of the paper, in essentials unity, in non-essentials liberty, in all things charity.

One of the good traditions of the Catholic News is that it is financially viable. This is not merely a money issue but one of professionalism. It makes us work hard to ensure that our paper is worth buying. We know of course that we have a captive audience of Catholics, but our readership is not static. The better our product the greater profit we make and the more money we have to put back into improving the paper - and conveying the message of Jesus more effectively.

One of the most important of our innovations has been Vision, our monthly eight-page supplement written by young people for their peers. This has been a real success story. Our purpose was twofold: first to attract young people to read the Catholic News and second to initiate young people into journalism as a vocation - a profession, requiring hard work and professionalism and a way of spreading the Christian message.

It is gratifying to us that several young people who came through Vision are now living out their Christian vocation working for secular papers

Over the years Vision has had its ups and downs, but the present group is the best we have had.

This augurs well for the future of Catholic journalism in our country and the region.

Before closing, I would like to pay tribute to Archbishop Pantin who was ex officio, the owner of the Catholic News. It was a privilege to work with him. He trusted us totally, knowing that the paper would stand for the values he believed in and we in turn trusted him. We knew that he would always let us do our work as we thought best. May he rest in peace.