

“JUST THE FACTS, MA’AM” CIVILITY AND TRUTH IN PERIL

The juxtaposition could not have been more stark. I had just returned to the rectory from attending a delightful production of *Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat* at Saint Agnes School, when I turned on the television to catch the *post mortem* of the annual White House Correspondents Dinner. The musical was extremely well-done, entertaining and joyous, involving kids of all ages from the K-12 school. The **White House Correspondents Dinner**? Had I been home watching, I surely would have changed the channel in disgust; I’ve become a channel flipper, too bored with the banality of cable news to remain focused. Surprisingly, the usual suspects—CNN, MSNBC and Fox News, each with its own perspective—were substantially in agreement. When I tuned in, CNN anchor John Berman appeared very serious, following what is billed as an evening of media frivolity. I instantly surmised that something had to have happened. When he candidly explained that much of what the headliner had said was vulgar, I merely shook my head. Has it come to this?

In the following days, pundits predictably opined: “Relax, it’s comedy.” (So, comedy is at its core vulgar?) “Comedians are supposed to be edgy.” (They can’t be clever, funny and clean?) or “Well, Donald Trump got a taste of his own medicine.” (Since when do two wrongs equal a right?) to name but a few. Each missed the point. It is not about whether comedy is supposed to be edgy, but about the central question of the media’s role in our Republic. Do we really want White House correspondents participating in “knock-knock” joke bits at an event crudely critical of the President? The WHCD is an ill-fitting garment from a bygone era. Begun in 1921 for a mere 50 journalists, it has morphed into a gala for 3000 red-carpet walking “celebrities” from inside the Beltway. Enough!

Derived from the European concept of the three estates (clergy, nobility and commoners), the media comprise the so-called “fourth estate.” They ostensibly fulfill the objective functions of seeking the truth and reporting it accurately, so that the people may draw their own conclusions. That function largely ended with the advent of a **24-hour cable news cycle**. I am old enough to recall both a morning and an evening newspaper arriving on our front step. We relied on print media and the 5:30 p.m. national news to keep us informed. Television stations shut down late at night, and we early risers could catch the Star-Spangled Banner at the dawn of a new broadcast day. Okay, enough of nostalgia. But we considered the news to be objective, while commentators interpreted the facts. By any objective standard, that distinction has all but vanished.

In January, the Gallup/Knight Foundation issued a report on “trust, media and democracy” that ran over 70 pages. Among its findings gleaned from the extensive surveys that comprised the research, was the fact that while eight in ten Americans believe the news media are “critical” or “very important” to our democracy, **only 44% of Americans** surveyed could name a news source that “reports the news objectively.” Do you think a survey would have yielded the same data when **Walter Cronkite** was delivering the evening news? More Americans have a negative (43%) than a positive (33%) view of the news media, while 23% are neutral. The Associated Press arguably has the most stringent guidelines for sourcing and double-checking facts before reporting. Most networks resisted jumping ahead of the AP, for fear of being wrong. Recall the **2000 Presidential Election** and the results from Florida? NBC was the first network to make the **wrong call** at 7:50 EST, even before the FL panhandle had finished voting. “We don’t just have egg on our face,” NBC’s Tom Brokaw lamented. “We have an omelette.” NBC desperately wanted to be the first to make the call.

Original research has taken a hit, as people derive their news from Google searches and Wikipedia articles. My “Pet Peeve” alert—when people produce quotations from saints that contain no sources, be suspicious! Such quotations are all over the internet, lacking any citation. “He who sings prays twice,” is often attributed to St. Augustine. Trouble is, he never wrote “*Qui cantat bis orat.*” Even the Catechism of the Catholic Church got it wrong, referencing Augustine in its footnote. In that citation from *Exposition on Psalm 72(73)* he actually wrote: “In praise, there is the speaking forth of one confessing; in singing, the affection of one loving.” I agree 100%, but he never wrote that singing is “praying twice” in that work.

The Vatican’s annual message for Social Communications derided “**fake news**” and rightly so. But less than

two months later, the Monsignor who oversaw the Secretariat for Communications resigned amidst the scandal over doctoring a photo of a private letter sent by Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI, who had graciously declined to offer a review of a series of books, expressing surprise that one of its authors had even “led anti-papal initiatives.” The Monsignor inexplicably chose to omit that fact while simultaneously implying the former pontiff’s endorsement at a News Conference. The truth always takes a hit when our own biases get in the way. I too have fallen into this error. It is plain hard to be completely objective, as we all view the world through a lens. And yet, journalism strives to be objective by its very constitution. But I digress.

With a hat tip to Sgt. Joe Friday, the facts matter. If journalists value objectivity in seeking to provide a critically important service to humanity, then they need to examine their consciences. They must strive to present facts and let the people draw conclusions. Instead, the White House Press Corps invited a foul-mouthed comedienne, whom they had to know employs insults as her shtick, and then distanced themselves in the aftermath when their plan backfired. **Civility has become an endangered species**, with many preferring instead to score cheap points at the expense of the dignity of others. In a pluralistic society, there will always be disagreements. That is at the heart of democracy. But rudeness ought to have no place, especially under the guise of protected speech in an event designed to bring people together to celebrate the place of journalism.

- Today’s annual Rosary Procession is a visible witness to the powerful intercession of Mary in our lives and in our families. Gather with Bishop Cozzens at 1:30 p.m. at the Capitol. The procession to the Cathedral begins promptly at 2:00 p.m. All are invited.
- For two years, ISIS occupying forces near Aleppo, Syria paid little attention to a mound of land where they dumped trash. In fact, it hid a tunnel to an early Christian underground Church with crosses carved into walls and geometric designs consistent with the Roman era. Thankfully, ISIS militants were not curious— they surely would have destroyed it. Vatican researchers may even be dispatched to assist in inspecting the ruins, believed to be from the early 4th century.
- While I appreciate your positive feedback to my column in last week’s bulletin (Puerto Rico outreach), the thanks belongs to all of you. Your concern for others is a large part of why it such a joy to be here.

Sincerely in Christ,

Fr. John L. Ubel,
Rector