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## Media

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### Stopping the press

By RAYMOND A. SCHROTH

Two depressing facts hit the news wires in early February: that the institutional Catholic church is still not an open institution and that today's press has its eyes fixed more on maximizing profits than on both informing and disturbing the public.

The case of the *Philadelphia Inquirer* versus its own ex-reporter Ralph Cipriano versus Cardinal Anthony J. Bevilacqua and the Philadelphia archdiocese is back. Sounds complicated? Indeed it is. *NCR* readers know part of it because the *National Catholic Reporter*, on June 19, 1998, published Cipriano's prize-winning investigative article on the archdiocese, including embarrassing material that his own paper, the *Inquirer*, had cut.

But today the case is hot again for three reasons:

- Ralph Cipriano sued the *Inquirer* for libel when his editor, Robert J. Rosenthal (now the editor and executive vice president), told *Washington Post* columnist Howard Kurtz, "There were things we didn't publish that Ralph wrote that we didn't think were truthful. He could never prove them." Joe Nicholson -- a Holy Cross graduate, a former *New York Post*, *New York Daily News* and Associated Press reporter, and occasional *Commonweal* contributor -- has chronicled Cipriano's case for the Feb. 5 *Editor & Publisher*, the industry's authoritative trade publication, and revealed that the *Inquirer* has coughed up a "reported" \$7 million to settle the suit and has been "cowed" by the church and its public relations firm into softening its coverage.
- In the February *Philadelphia Magazine*, writer Maximilian Potter, a self-described "lapsed Catholic," profiled Brian Tierney, the high-powered local adman and publicist whose firm coached the archdiocese on how to face down the *Inquirer* when Cipriano's investigations of diocesan finances began to embarrass the cardinal. Tierney -- 75 percent of whose clients are Republicans -- was hired

to solve George W. Bush's "Catholic problem": He got the cardinal on stage at the Republican Convention, sprinkled the crowd with dozens of priests and nuns, and rallied over 100,000 new Catholic votes for Bush in Florida. Barnstorming for Bush, Tierney bragged that the pope had named him a Knight of St. Gregory and implied that Bush's policies, including his tax cut, matched those of the church.

- A *Columbia Journalism Review* survey (November/December 1999) ranked the *Inquirer* as the 11th-best paper in the country but had to mention the exodus of top editors trained by Gene Roberts, who left to become managing editor of the *New York Times* and now [is a professor at the University of Maryland College of Journalism.] *Columbia Journalism Review* asks: "Has it lost its fire?"

Today, some *Inquirer* staff members blame Cipriano's single-minded abrasiveness for the paper's troubles. Others are wondering whether they are still free to fulfill the gospel of American journalism: "Comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable." They are not alone. Across the country, the conglomerates that own newspapers are demanding an unheard-of 15 percent to 20 percent profits for the stockholders. Word -- or unspoken signals -- comes down from the boardroom: Don't make waves; don't upset imagined "opinion leaders," like businessmen or cardinals, who might nip advertising or circulation.

Cipriano's troubles involve two periods: 1991-93, when, as religion reporter, he profiled Bevilacqua and began investigating the diocese's big expenditures on an elaborate video-conferencing center and \$200,000 to refurbish his beachfront summer residence in Ventnor, at a time when the diocese was raising \$100 million to save struggling parishes and schools; and 1996-97, when, working on a new profile for the magazine, he discovered, along with other financial problems, that the diocese had settled a suit for \$87,000 with a former employee who claimed the cardinal had been "rude and abusive" toward him.

Upset at the direction Cipriano's investigation was taking, Tierney staged three meetings with *Inquirer* editors, where, as is his method, he does not dialogue but harangues his captive listeners non-stop, employing slangy language like "cool" and "dude," not letting his listeners forget that, with his control of his clients' advertising budgets, he is one of the most powerful men in town.

According to Nicholson's report on Cipriano's legal complaint, Tierney warned Cipriano and the editors he could "ruin" them and said to Cipriano, "We got rid of you once, and we'll do it again." The *Inquirer*'s Jonathan Neumann, who was Cipriano's supervisor, described Tierney's method as "insulting" and "demeaning." Phillip Dixon, currently deputy managing editor, called it "venomous."

Despite Cipriano's eight months of research, editors trimmed the piece, which ran April 14, 1997, to 167 lines.

Rosenthal said later in deposition that his statement to the *Washington Post* was directed not against Cipriano's written material but his comments on the cardinal's personal life. Bevilacqua told Nicholson that he knew of no one investigating his personal life and had nothing to hide.

But Bevilacqua set out immediately to put the *Inquirer* on the defensive. First, in his newsletter, "The Voice of Your Shepherd," he called the story on his "little used" media center "fallacious" and found it "disturbing" that the paper had left Cipriano on the story in spite of their meetings. He would allow no news organization, he said, "to unjustly malign the Catholic church."

Second, he demanded that the *Inquirer* print his long rebuttal in its entirety. In an internal memo, Neumann called Bevilacqua's letter "false and libelous" and warned against "caving in." The *Inquirer* printed it on May 19, 1997, but stood by Cipriano's reporting as "objective and ethical."

Perhaps it helps to look at it this way: There are two kinds of reporters -- the retrievers and the bloodhounds. One brings back the story content to merely depict the surface of a situation -- an earthquake, a fire, a school closing -- without reference to the shabby construction that made the buildings collapse, the building inspector who didn't make his rounds, the financial mistakes or misplaced priorities that closed the school. This is sometimes called, incorrectly, "objective" journalism.

The bloodhound smells something wrong, and the whiff of blood quickens his senses. If he exposes the problem, someone will be embarrassed enough to fix it. The bloodhounds don't all have warm fuzzy personalities, but journalism could not fulfill its role as "tribune," defender of the weak, without them.

Cipriano went back to work, did more research, and offered his 9,000-word article to *NCR*. When it appeared, readers saw an enigmatic cardinal, a masterful politician in front of a crowd, but an isolated, sometimes rude administrator toward those who had to deal with him day by day; a big spender -- embellishing his private mansion, his headquarters and summer house -- with a history of poor money management; and a successful fundraiser to "save the schools," who immediately set about closing parishes and schools, particularly in North Philadelphia, the poorest part of town.

Not a flattering portrait, but, ironically, the fall-out, the long-range consequences of Bevilacqua's attempt to stop the presses, has done more harm to both the archdiocese and a great newspaper than any piece of investigative journalism could accomplish.

Defending the *Inquirer* in a letter to *Editor & Publisher* (Feb. 12), David O'Reilly, the current religion writer, points to his own three-part 1999 series on the archdiocese, including the parish closings, as comparable to "anything your martyred saint, Ralph Cipriano, ever produced" and a

“worthier model of reporting to hold up to young journalists” than Cipriano’s “Holy Grail.” (My call to O’Reilly and request for a copy of the series got no response.) Phillip Dixon, in a letter, said *Editor & Publisher* erred in reporting the settlement at \$7 million. It was “nowhere near that amount.”

The *Inquirer* maintains that the Tierney offensive did not stop the story or weaken their coverage. Yet, Bevilacqua himself told *Editor & Publisher*, referring to the 1996-1997 meetings between *Inquirer* editors and Tierney, “He stopped the story. That was the important thing.” As a result, the cardinal now finds the *Inquirer* “very positive in their stories, much more than they have ever been,” even better than the archdiocese’s own paper, *The Catholic Standard and Times*. The *Inquirer* even offered Bevilacqua a weekly column.

Although former editor Gene Roberts told *Editor & Publisher* that the church should be subject to the same scrutiny as any institution, Tierney and the archdiocese, and it seems the current leadership at the *Inquirer*, which has a renowned stable of investigative journalists, disagree.

Meanwhile, the cardinal has his costly properties and his costly victory, and Cipriano has a few million dollars -- and his professional self-respect.

*Jesuit Fr. Raymond A. Schroth is the Jesuit community professor of the humanities at St. Peter’s College in Jersey City, N.J. His e-mail address is **raymondschroth@aol.com***

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