

Election speech  
6/24/11

I want to thank you for the great honor and responsibility of electing me to serve you as president of this organization for the next two years.

As many of the workshops and plenaries of this conference have shown us, we face some great challenges. On Wednesday morning, when Helen Osman compared the digital age that we live in now with the invention of the printing press, I thought, “Oh great. Guess I’m the monk with the quill!”

We do face great challenges: all of us are under financial pressure. We struggle to do more with less. We seek to be true to our mission but we wake up sometimes in the middle of the night and wonder if we’ll make it. If we’ll be able to protect those who work for us. If we’ll be able to do all that is expected of us.

And the road ahead is unclear. In the last half decade, we have seen the arrival of YouTube and Twitter, the rise of Wikipedia, the diffusion of the smart phone, the launch of the iPad, and the Great Recession. Who knows what lies ahead in the next five years?

It is unavoidable. We must face the brutal facts of our reality. I take that phrase from an excellent business book by Jim Collins called “Good to Great.” Collins see the ability to face the brutal facts without paralysis or denial as a hallmark of great companies. He calls this the Stockdale paradox, named after a U.S. admiral who was a P.O.W. in Vietnam for 8 years and tortured repeatedly. Stockdale told him that the key to his survival was faith combined with absolute realism:

“You must never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end – which you can never afford to lose – with the discipline to confront the most brutal facts of your current reality, whatever they might be.”

We need to face our brutal facts, look them straight in the eye. But we must also have faith – in ourselves, in each other, in this community of media professionals – that we will prevail.

*We have heard from so many good people at this conference. Smart, hardworking, dedicated people. We need to tap into the insights and experience of our peers, and we need to share our own insights and experience with others. We need to recognize that we are stronger when we work together – editor and business manager, communications director and editor, advertising and marketing, bishops, priests and laity.*

I have been advised to keep my goals for the coming two years to a list of one. That is smart advice that I will ignore. I’ve been asking many people for their ideas, and I do have a few key priorities.

First, we need to identify and expand the benefits of being a member of this organization. Financial stability and growth in membership will follow if it is obvious to our members what the value of this organization is.

We need to expand our education opportunities – not just once a year at this conference, but in webinars and conference calls throughout the year. Perhaps we can build on experiences like the

Midwest e-mail roundtable that Marylynn Hewitt started some years ago, which became a model of CPA peers collaborating with each to solve problems and identify best practices.

*We also need to recognize and build on our diversity: Male and female. Latino and African American. Magazines and e-newsletters. Freelancers and communications professionals of all sorts. Newcomers and seasoned professionals. This diversity is a strength, but these many different members must believe that membership in this organization benefits them.*

Thanks to the leadership of Tim Walters, our CPA office has grown increasingly responsive to members, and we want to build on that. I think we can start with improvements to our website.

I also want the CPA to resurrect the consultation service, utilizing the resources of this organization – that is, our people – to provide assistance and counsel to bishops and editors who are facing tough decisions. No one in our profession should feel that he or she is alone when facing the brutal facts, and bishops need to see us as an organization that is here to help them find the best solutions as well.

The bottom line is that if our peers know that this organization is of benefit to them, then this organization will not have to worry about its bottom line.

My second priority is that we as an organization continue to grow in awareness of our own vocations as communicators. All that we do – our headlines, in our reporting and commentary, in our design, in our ad sales, in our marketing campaigns – is really a form of evangelization. Since 2012 is the year of the new evangelization, and we learned yesterday that evangelization is a priority both for us and for the bishops, this is an insight we can build on, and it ultimately is the reason we continue to exist.

But while we are all working for the kingdom, these enterprises we work for and lead don't belong to us. For 100 years, the members of this organization have been striving to do their very best, to work as hard as they can, to inform and form Catholics, to bear witness to the world. But at day's end – when we turn out the lights in our offices – we know that this is God's business, not ours. This is the source of our unshakeable faith that Admiral Stockdale talked about.

It is not all up to us. And we are not alone.

My third priority is that we maintain our sense of humor, which is truly a gift from God. So I'll end with a joke.

An old Italian in New Jersey wants to plant his annual tomato garden, but the ground is hard, and his son Vincent, who used to help him, is in prison. The old man writes a letter to his son describing his predicament.

*Dear Vincent, I am feeling pretty sad because it looks like I won't be able to plant my tomato garden this year. I'm just getting too old to be digging up a garden plot. I know that if you were here, my troubles would be over. You'd be happy to dig my plot, like in the old days. Love, Papa.*

A few days later, a letter comes from his son:

*Dear Papa,*

*Don't dig up that garden. That's where the bodies are buried. Love, Vinnie.*

At 4 a.m. the next morning, the FBI and the local police barged into the old man's house with a search warrant and spent the whole morning digging up the area without finding any bodies. They eventually apologized to the old man and left.

That same day, the old man received another letter from his son:

*Dear Papa, Now you can go ahead and plant the tomatoes. That's the best I could do under the circumstances. Love, Vinnie.*

So that's my final message to you all. No matter how tough it gets, there is always a solution if we are creative enough, and if we maintain our sense of humor.

Now I'd like to introduce an important member of our leadership team, Rob DeFrancesco, your new vice president. Rob is a multi-talented individual. He has served as secretary to the board of directors. He is a representative of the great western region of our organization, and he is both a communications director and associate publisher. As Vice President, Rob will take a lead role in expanding our membership. Rob.