Letters to the Editor


The Catholic Messenger does not accept letters to the editor concerning individual candidates. We do accept letters addressing political issues. //3-6-08

Mike Krokos, The Criterion, Indianapolis

A few potential letters to the editor have started trickling in about the upcoming presidential election. I have been asked to seek input from other publications about their letters policy during the political season when so many folks are so passionate about their beliefs and sharing them with others. I know this can be especially challenging for Catholic publications. //8-20-08

Brian T. Olszewski, Catholic Herald -- Milwaukee

In our current issue is a letter to the readers in which I let them know we will continue to accept political advertising, urge them to read “Faithful Citizenship,” and spell out our letters policy: “…letters related to the presidential election that are published will appear in one of the issues between Sept. 11 and Oct. 23. Succinct and signed letters that address concerns in light of Catholic social teaching and “Forming Consciences for Faithful Citizenship: A Call to Political Responsibility” will be given priority when letters are considered for publication. “Letters must come from members of the Catholic community in the 10-county Archdiocese of Milwaukee. Copies of letters sent to other publications, groups or individuals will not be published, nor will personal attacks. All letters are subject to editing. No more than one letter per person will be published during this time.” //8-21-08

Steve Euvino, Northwest Indiana Catholic, Gary

I feel the answer lies in two areas: your use of letters and any political advertising. Our paper does not get a lot of local letters. We also do not run political ads; I know some Catholic papers do. The problem I have with political letters is that, while they allow people to express their views, these letters are, to me, free political ads. If you don't run political ads, why give people a free shot? Also, it puts our papers in the uncomfortable position of appearing to play politics. Having worked in community journalism for nearly 30 years and having covered local elections, I can say that politics is ugly, messy business, and the most political people in the world are those who say they are not political. Also, sadly and incredibly, once an election is over, the folk who did the most mudslinging mysteriously disappear: they act (depending on how their candidate did) as if nothing happened. Besides, with all the Internet junk out there, let these people blog themselves into oblivion. //8-21-08

Lisa Bourne, Office of Communications, Diocese of Des Moines

I'm wondering if the editors in the forum could be asked for comment on the subject of letters to the editor. What do you look for in a good letter to the editor? What do you avoid when considering publishing a letter? How much is too frequent to hear from the same person, or how often would you accept a submission from the same source? Anything else you think it's important to know in choosing letters from publishing? //9-21-09

Paul Schratz, editor, The B.C. Catholic, Archdiocese of Vancouver

We look for letters that are 100-200 words, topical, charitable, and make sense. We don't run letters contrary to Church teaching without a good reason, and then an editor’s note of clarification will follow. Disagreeing with our coverage and commentary, however, is encouraged. When I worked at dailies, we had a limit of one letter per three months, but we can’t be as choosy, so I’d say about once a month is about right. //9-23-09

Kathleen Ogle, Managing Editor, The Catholic Spirit

I like to publish letters that have something constructive to say about what has been published in our newspaper, what's going on in the diocese or the church at large. Many of the letters we get are not suitable for publication. I try to avoid publishing letters that contain false information (e.g., death panels), are about articles that were published in the secular newspapers, that are
obviously politically partisan, that are intended to thank an individual or group, that promote positions contrary to church teaching, or that are better dealt with privately by the Chancery. I also won't publish letters promoting other bishops' positions, especially if they are counter to my bishop's position on a given issue. It does seem like the same people write most of the letters. I don't have a specific policy on how often is too often to publish a letter from the same person.

We're a weekly so once a month would probably be OK. Again, the most important thing is that he/she has something worthwhile to say. ●/9-29-09

Tricia Hempel, The Catholic Telegraph, Cincinnati
My feeling has always been that letter-writers take responsibility for what they write, but many of our readers seem to feel that printing the letter is an endorsement. I was approached by the entire theology department faculty of a local Jesuit university asking me to print a letter that supported future discussion of women's ordination. They wanted it as a guest column, and I said no. But with a letter, signed by all, I felt they were digging their own potential graves. However, lots of cancellations of subscriptions as a result. I forewarned our archbishop and he was okay with the letter running. (I hope the university president knew, but it wasn’t my place to tell him!). I hate the letters that give any appearance of dissent, even when they don’t really dissent — our readers don’t seem sharp enough to catch the difference. Between this and all the hateful and ignorant letters we seem to get, I’ve given thought to eliminating the letters section altogether. This seems to brand the paper as one that does not encourage dialogue, however. Any thoughts? How do you all determine which letters to use and which ones not to use? Policies on letters such as the faculty one? Don’t you love the vitriolic ones that are signed "In Christ’s love"? ●/11-30-09

Matthew Gambino, Director and General Manager, The Catholic Standard and Times, Archdiocese of Philadelphia
In a psychological sense, letters are a big challenge because they represent an unending stream of anger, intolerance and hatred from our readers. (With friends like this...) This general theory of negativity is only occasionally broken by a compliment. That's the way it goes; you learn to accept what you cannot change. It is the price of attempting to encourage a dialogue among readers, which is the purpose of Letters to the Editor. My view is that we'll print letters that don't call names (civility), that don't insult the archbishop personally (we are not independent, he's our publisher) and that don't contradict the faith (i.e., denying the real presence).

In the case of writers dissenting from a particular church teaching, I'd ask what is to be gained from printing it? Does anyone really think that a letter suddenly will bring about a reversal of a teaching the Church says is rooted in Scripture and tradition? Not likely. It is likely to further divide readers or at least confuse them to think that such a teaching might change within our lifetimes, if ever. I don't think that is a responsible course for a Catholic newspaper.

Then there is the inevitable loss of subscriptions. That might happen with any given item in a paper so it's not a reason not to run a piece, but in this case, much more is to be lost than gained in running the letter. You're well within your rights to deny or accept * and edit * anything.

One good practice is to choose a letter or two that better represent a viewpoint made by many writers. That way you get the point across and avoid the vitriol of the other writers, while not "piling on" the issue. ●/12-2-09

Bob Lockwood, Pittsburgh Catholic
I will confess – with all proper Catholic guilt – that I eliminated running letters. The fact is that lay readers – as well as diocesan staff, media, pastors, Catholic leadership, the bishop, perhaps God – all view the newspaper as the official vehicle of the Diocese of Pittsburgh. Running letters of dissent – or simply inanity – is read as an endorsed position of the Church of Pittsburgh. I view it the same as political advertising. No matter how much we argued and placed “paid political advertisement” all over it, ads were viewed as endorsements by the Church. So we got rid of them and we got rid of letters.

It’s simply the nature of who we are. We are not independent journals. Like it or not, diocesan newspapers are the official voice of the Diocese. ●/12-2-09
Barb Arland-Fye, Editor, The Catholic Messenger, Davenport
I can feel Tricia's pain. Been there, done that. But I wouldn't think of eliminating letters to the editor. Readers are eager to see what others have to say, as long as the letters don't get repetitive. We have generated some very interesting dialogue about such topics as eucharistic adoration based on guest opinions and letters that have been published.

But with the dialogue comes headaches. The vitriol at times is stunning, not very Christ-like at all. I make the decisions about what letters will be published, but consult with my staff and others who might offer insight about a particular letter or guest opinion. We have a letters policy, which is deliberately general so that it allows us to be flexible. I had drafted a guest opinions policy, but decided against publishing it because people will still argue with me about why I won't run their guest opinion. As my Board of Directors has said more than once, you're the editor. It's your decision. People need to understand that.  //12-2-09

Christopher D. Ringwald, Editor, The Evangelist, Albany, NY
I do try to give readers latitude. On this issue, however, we did use letters from lay people advocating women priests but did not do so with one from a priest on advice that it would give scandal to have an ordained person contradicting the pope.

But we do run letters -- within bounds-- criticizing the bishop and the paper and the diocese, as well as the Church at large, from both the right and left. Lately we've been faulted for running letters with questionable assertions of facts (% of federal budget going to foreign aid or defense, for instance). Again, I try to allow some latitude but other times ask writers to verify facts first. The give-and-take adds to our credibility and allows room for discussions that are occurring regardless of our participation.  //12-2-09

Teak Phillips, Editor, St. Louis Review, Archdiocese of St. Louis
I view letters to the editor as just that. They are letters to me. Sometimes they are critical of the publication or the Church, sometimes they are thought-provoking and sometimes they just let me know how readers are reacting to the publication. They are not story comments (the way we know them on web publications) and the writer has no inherent right for them to be published. If I choose to share the letter to me it is because I think it has value that other Catholics would appreciate.

We consider our publication an evangelical tool. Our primary responsibility is to help Catholics apply their faith on a daily basis. We do so by sharing with them examples of other Catholics practicing authentic Catholic lifestyles and giving them news about the archdiocese, its agencies, parishes, schools, etc. We cannot fulfill that mission if our content is not catechetically or canonically sound, even if it's signed by somebody as an “opinion.”

To allow the letters section to become a sounding board for people who openly challenge basic teachings of the Church would only confuse Catholics who we are trying the hardest to reach: those who are struggling with the faith because of the pressure of a secular culture that is counter to what we believe. There are plenty of other publications willing to allow some “Catholics” to argue for female ordination; a diocesan publication shouldn't be one.

I have chosen not to publish any letters some weeks because the letters just weren’t publishable. They were poorly written, not Catholic or just vitriolic in nature. I have published a note explaining our guidelines and that has usually prompted harsh reaction from the dissenters who say I am just trying to appease the archbishop.

Our basic policy is that letters should be timely, well written and concise. We do not publish open letters to politicians and generally stay away from letters that criticize other publications. Letters can address the Church’s teachings as long as they are about seeking answers or challenging us to be better Catholics, not ridiculing our bishops, pope or catechism. We sometimes publish an editor’s response. We want our letters section to be constructive, not destructive (although I have published some letters I later regretted).

Letters are a good way to engage our readers, encourage dialogue and enable Catholics to develop a relationship with our publication, but we can’t do that at the expense of sound Catholic education.  //12-2-09

Vicki Cessna, Director of Communications/editor of The Good News, Diocese of Kalamazoo
I appreciate all the comments on the letters to the Editor. Just today I received one that included a “Shame on you!” and a request to see our newspaper include “opposing opinions” to the bishops (in this case the healthcare issue). Our newspaper, similar to what Bob Lockwood expressed, is the official publication of the diocese and our bishop is the publisher. Our mission is to be a teaching tool and as such I am in agreement with both Bob and Teak. We have rarely published letters and when we do they generally are about an omission which gives me an opportunity to provide a mea culpa. Thanks for the valuable discussion!  //12-4-09

Paul Schratz, The B.C. Catholic, Vancouver, B.C.

Looking after letters to the editor at secular dailies, I remember we received so few well written letters that I’m not discouraged by what our present readers send in.

I agree with editors who say it typically isn’t the place of a diocesan paper to run letters challenging Church teachings. We’re a voice of the bishop, and our mandate is to help him instruct the faithful. We should no more be running letters questioning the male-only priesthood than Apple’s in-house newspaper would run letters trashing Macs.

That said, I think there can be a place for the odd letter to the editor questioning the Church, if it represents a sizable number of people with a similar misunderstanding, and provided an editor’s blurb uses the letter as a teaching moment, clarifying the matter by correcting an error, explaining a teaching, etc.

I’m also open to the odd letter questioning a prudential decision by the bishop or a political call by the Pope, but again it would have to represent the views of more than one person. It would also have to be well informed, well written, and charitable. Not many of those out there. //12-4-09