

Letter-Writing Workshop Presentation

By Matt C. Abbott

My presentation is relatively short, so I would first like to talk about media bias, something that shouldn't be too shocking to anyone here. Then, I'd like to go over points on good letter writing, nicely put together by the Father Hardon Media Apostolate and Terry Sullivan. Finally, I will "open the floor" to any questions you may have.

Regarding media bias, there is an excellent resource – a book by Dr. & Mrs. John C. Willke. It's titled, *Why Can't We Love Them Both?* In it, I found a couple of interesting items. They first go back to 1981, which seems like a long time ago. But we can assume that what was the case back then in the media is pretty much the same, if not worse, today.

"[A] report was based on 'hour long interviews with 240 journalists and broadcasters at the most influential media outlets including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Time Magazine*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News and World Report*, CBS, NBC, ABC, PBS, etc." Among the findings were that 90% said a woman had the right to choose abortion. Forty-six percent felt adultery was wrong, with only 15% feeling strongly about it, and 76% approved of living with someone of the opposite sex.

"On religion, 50% denied any religious affiliation. Twenty-three percent were raised Jewish, but only 14% were practicing Judaism at the time. Only one in five identified themselves as Protestant, one in eight as Catholic. Overall, however, only 8% went to church or synagogue weekly with 86% attending seldom or never. They were largely male, white, highly educated, with high incomes" (Willke, 329-330).

Fast forward to 1996. "A survey of 139 Washington-based journalists showed that 89% voted for Clinton in '92, 7% for Bush and 2% for Perot, so no change here. Further, only 2% identified themselves as conservative, while the 'moderate to liberal' category claimed 91%" (Willke, 332).

Should we give up on the media? Is it hopeless? "Quite the contrary. We must get acquainted with media people. They will see us as single issue? True, but they must also see us as well-spoken and professional, not irresponsible fire-brands. We must try to educate them. Many media people have gross misconceptions of us and what we stand for" (Willke, 333).

A passage from the Vatican II document, *Decree on the Media of Social Communications*, also known as *Inter Mirifica*:

"...The Church recognizes that these media, if properly utilized, can be of great service to mankind, since they greatly contribute to men's entertainment and instruction as well as to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God...Since public opinion exercises the greatest power and authority today in every sphere of life, both private and public, every member of society

must fulfill the demands of justice and charity in this area. As a result, all must strive, through these media as well, to form and spread sound public opinion...."

Now I will talk a bit about how I go into writing letters. I was actually observing a few sessions of the *NOW vs. Scheidler* trial in 1998. Of course the original verdict was not in our [pro-lifers] favor. (They were found guilty of "racketeering.") So I felt prompted to fire off a couple of letters on that subject. I sent one to the *Chicago Sun-Times*, one to the *Chicago Tribune* and one to the *Daily Herald* newspaper. At least two of those letters were published....

Use the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* as your inspiration – it's an excellent guide. It's not, however, a good idea to quote directly from it, especially if you are writing to secular newspapers. Catholic newspapers are another matter, but for secular newspapers, it's better to paraphrase.

Letters, of course, do get edited....

Tips for letter-writing: Write to convert, not necessarily confront. Write charitably. Avoid a slap back approach. You can write strongly and still be charitable. A good phrase to use is, "It would appear that..." Submit letters promptly. It's best, I would say, to submit your letters within 24 hours. A general rule: the sooner the better. I think it's best to fax or email. "Snail" mail is good if you are writing to a particular editor, or if you don't intend the letter to be for publication.

Make the chief points first. Letters are typically edited from the bottom up. Which is another reason why shortness and brevity is preferable - and it's less likely that it will be mangled by editors. Also, it's helpful to write in response to a particular story or column in a newspaper. Now, often times, I will submit my letter to several publications, although a few of the major newspapers want "exclusive-only" letters. Avoid criticizing the outlet itself for something they published or broadcast.

In general keep in mind the basic elements of persuasion: to teach, to delight, and to move people.

Plant the seed, and let God do the rest.

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