
Substance Abuse

"Thank You, God, for Newt Gingrich" by Carl M. Cannon, and "The New Congress & the Old Media" by Terry Eastland, in *Forbes MediaCritic* (Spring 1995), P.O. Box 762, Bedminster, N.J. 07921.

"Today," anchorman Tom Brokaw announced, introducing a story on the NBC evening news last September 27, "GOP congressional candidates were summoned to Washington and given a battle plan. However, as NBC's Lisa Myers tells us tonight, it is long on promises but short on sound premises."

And that's the way it was for the mainstream news media last fall, argues Cannon, who covers the White House for the *Baltimore Sun*. The national news media gave short shrift to the House Republicans' now-famous "Contract with America" and thus missed the story of what the elections of 1994 were all about: a choice between two competing visions of government.

"USA Today, in an advance story on September 27, quoted none of the 367 Republicans who would sign the contract," Cannon notes, "but did report the White House view that the contract was a 'gimmick' that would cut Social Security and Medicare and shower tax cuts on the rich." The *Boston Globe* the next day quoted three Democrats—including the White House chief of staff, who called the contract "a fraud"—but no Republicans. In general, Cannon says, the press served up the Democratic version of the GOP contract and failed to explore the document's contents or its signifi-

cance in the 1994 elections.

Why? One reason, speculates Eastland, editor of *Forbes MediaCritic*, was simply lack of familiarity with the players and politics inside the Republican Party. After decades of Democratic control of Congress (except for the six years during the 1980s when the GOP held the Senate), journalists were not in the habit of taking pronouncements by members of the minority party very seriously. As Steven V. Roberts of *U.S. News* said in an election post-mortem, "the press treated the Republicans with the same disdain for many years that the Democrats treated the Republicans: they didn't pay much attention to them." The press, however, does follow the election returns, and it has become very attentive. In fact, Eastland notes, "after the election, news organizations hustled to do in-depth pieces on the contract."

Washington journalists can be counted on to educate themselves about the Senate and House Republicans, Eastland believes, and their reporting will be more accurate as a result. He is less confident that, in covering the 104th Congress, the press will overcome what conservatives have long seen as its liberal bias. An even greater obstacle to fair, balanced, and comprehensive coverage may be the news media's inclination to be relentlessly negative and to relish conflict for its own sake. Cannon suggests that perhaps journalists should consider offering their own contract with America: "It could include a promise to look beyond the spin for the substance."

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Future of Priestly Celibacy

"Numbers Don't Lie" by Richard A. Schoenherr, in *Commonweal* (Apr. 7, 1995), 15 Dutch St., New York, N.Y. 10038.

If demography is destiny, then the Roman Catholic Church in America seems almost

sure to experience before long a head-on collision between two cherished traditions: eucharistic worship and mandatory celibacy for priests. So argues Schoenherr, a sociologist at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

Ever since the Second Vatican Council (1962-65), the supply of ordained priests in the United States has been shrinking. From about

1,000 a year in the late 1960s, ordinations fell to roughly 500 annually during the '80s, before climbing back to about 600 a year in the early '90s. What little encouragement might be taken from that increase, Schoenherr notes, is dimmed by the fact that the number of Catholic seminarians in the final years of study before ordination has been decreasing steadily, from 8,325 in 1966 to 3,416 in 1993.

Compounding the problem of dwindling enlistments is the chronic defection of young priests from the active ministry. Although nowhere near as bad as it was in the early 1970s, when 95 percent of newly ordained priests were needed to fill vacancies created by resignation rather than death or retirement, the hemorrhaging continues. Today, four out of 10 newly ordained priests must fill such vacancies—and the other six are not enough to replace all the older priests who have retired or died. In the coming years, as the many priests ordained during the 1950s and '60s reach the end of their careers, Schoenherr points out, "natural attrition rates will begin to soar and the already limited supply of active priests will precipitously dwindle."

Meanwhile, he notes, membership in the Catholic Church in the United States has con-

tinued to grow, from roughly 45 million in 1965 to some 70 million today. "High fertility rates of Catholic families and the steady immigration of Asian and Hispanic Catholics account for most of the growth," Schoenherr says. For every active priest in 2005, there are expected to be 2,200 lay Catholics—twice the number in 1975.

The shortage of priests has been mitigated by greater lay participation in the Mass, Schoenherr observes. "Lay people now help plan the liturgy [and] actively participate by reciting prayers, singing hymns, reading the Scripture passages, serving at the altar, even preaching homilies, and distributing Communion." But priests are still required "to preside over sacramental celebrations, principally the eucharistic sacrifice of the Mass." Eventually, the church may be forced to limit the frequency of such rites.

Study after study in recent decades has concluded that mandatory celibacy, a requirement for Catholic priests since the 12th century, is at the root of the church's problems in recruiting and retaining priests. "The full weight of history and social change," Schoenherr concludes, "is turning against male celibate exclusivity in the Catholic priesthood."

SCIENCE, TECHNOLOGY & ENVIRONMENT

The Mystery of The Double Tongue

"The Serpent's Tongue" by Kurt Schwenk, in *Natural History* (Apr. 1995), American Museum of Natural History, Central Park West at 79th St., New York, N.Y. 10024.

Everyone knows that some humans employ a forked tongue to get around inconvenient truths, but why do *snakes* have forked tongues?

Aristotle imagined that the fork in their tongues gave snakes "a twofold pleasure from savors, their gustatory sensation being as it

were doubled." Plausible, notes Schwenk, a professor of ecology and evolutionary biology at the University of Connecticut—except for the fact that snakes have no taste buds. Early-20th-century scientists believed that the delicately forked organ helped to give snakes a sense of fine touch. But the serpents' frequent flicking of their tongues into the empty air suggested that that wasn't the answer, either.

During the 1920s and '30s, experimenters in Germany and the United States found some important clues. They discovered that when a snake flicks its tongue, it picks up chemical particles and brings them into its mouth. The