

The Billboard Controversy

One of the ways in which the bishops responded to the work of Priests for Life was the controversy in 2001 about our billboard project. The story follows.

1. Although Cardinal O'Connor of New York gave you permission to devote your ministry to protecting the unborn from abortion, his successor, Cardinal Egan, did not want to let you continue doing that, despite the success of the ministry.

Do you have any indication of why Cardinal Egan did not want you to continue a successful pro-life ministry?

Yes, I do, because another Cardinal let me in on it.

One day in Casper, Wyoming, when I was on a trip in March of 2001 speaking to clergy and women's groups in the diocese (and I am on the road most of the time in my Priests for Life ministry), I received a phone call at about 7:30am local time as I was getting out of a car at my first venue of the day. It was from Cardinal William Keeler, who at that time was the Archbishop of Baltimore. He was calling me in his capacity as the Chairman of the US Bishops' Committee on Pro-life Activities. He evidently didn't know I was on Mountain time, two hours earlier than Eastern Time.

He told me he had just gotten off the phone with two other cardinals... Cardinal Bernard Law of Boston, and my own Ordinary, Cardinal Edward Egan. All three of them were talking about me and Priests for Life.

Why?

Because we had recently [launched a national billboard campaign to promote awareness that healing and forgiveness are available](#) to those who have had abortions.

And to make a long story short, the bishops wanted it done *their way*. They wanted us to use the money we had raised for our billboard campaign and *use it to put up the billboards they had designed*, because, they maintained, their's were better and, after all, they're the bishops.

2. Was this the first time they had seen Priests for Life do a large media campaign?

No, this was not the first advertising campaign Priests for Life had done. In fact, the previous year, we were very much in the media regarding the elections of 2000, advocating for pro-life candidates across the board. And we collaborated closely with you on that election, as you well know, after you had received tremendous encouragement from Cardinal John O'Connor, not only to engage the Catholic vote nationally, but to win!

We held a major press conference at the National Press Club in Washington, DC, placed a full-page ad in the New York Times, sent material to Churches all over the country, and had multiple broadcasts on the subject.

During the course of that effort, I got a call from Bishop James McHugh, from the Diocese of Rockville Centre, NY. He was very active in pro-life himself. He told me some of the bishops had concerns about what we were doing, but that he felt that instead of talking behind my back, he should talk to me. I appreciated that because I was able to correct a misunderstanding he had about our message. (He

thought I was opposing the Republican ticket, saying it wasn't pro-life enough; instead, I explained, I was opposing the Democrat ticket because it was pro-abortion.)

But that was the only direct communication of concern I received from any bishop. Yet we were always available to talk with any bishops who had concerns. In fact, we sent updates regularly to every bishop about what we were doing, visited diocesan respect life offices all over the country (at our own expense), mailed our regular newsletter to every priest in the country (at our own expense), made regular phone calls to every diocesan respect life director, attended – when permitted to do so – the diocesan respect life conferences, gave the dioceses pro-life brochures and videos at no charge, formed our own advisory board of bishops, and visited the offices of the USCCB with regularity.

I remember with pleasure Bishop Vincent Breen of Metuchen, NJ, who, at the rally for the March for Life in Washington DC in January 2001, when we were in the VIP section before the March itself began, caught sight of me and came walking eagerly over to me with a big smile on his face and said loudly, “YOU are a HERO!!” He was referring to the role Priests for Life and I played in electing President George W. Bush.

So the bishops were hearing and seeing what we were doing, but precious few of them bothered to communicate directly. That remains true today, despite our open door policy.

3. Had you consulted with experts in abortion healing when developing the billboards?

Indeed we had. Priests for Life was already collaborating – both within and beyond Catholic circles -- with researchers, pastors, mental health professionals, social workers, and others who were experts in the damage abortion does to women and to the whole family.

In fact, Cardinal O'Connor had made it clear, when he first talked with me about my proposal to do pro-life work, how important it was to be attentive to healing the wounds of those who have had abortions. And he had led by example, so I had a great appreciation of the importance of this facet of the work.

Our team was studying and receiving training of various kinds from these experts, and we continue to do so to this day. I have email exchanges reflecting the conversations I had with various pioneers of abortion healing, asking them what they thought of our billboard. They asked questions, gave further suggestions, and praised our effort. Dr. Theresa Burke, for example (the co-founder of Rachel's Vineyard, the largest ministry in the world for healing after abortion) wrote, “It's very wonderful...very good and positive message.”

We also developed the initial billboard (the idea was that it would be the first of many, adjusting them as we went along based on continued testing), in partnership with a public relations/media company. We were also developing TV and radio ads. The message was, “Hurting from abortion? The doors of the Church are open.”

The initial version of the billboard showed the front of a church and a priest welcoming the onlooker to come in. (Because I was already one of the nation's most visible opponents of abortion, the media company thought the image should be me. That was not my idea, however. But multiple advisors said that because so many people already knew me and were enthusiastic about the work we were doing, that this would help educate them about the fact that we who oppose abortion do not oppose those who have abortions.)

4. So what was the concern of the bishops about your billboard project?

There were three concerns: a) they didn't think the content was appropriate; b) they didn't think we had adequately consulted them, and c) they didn't think the Churches were ready to receive the number of people who would come forward as a result of a major advertising campaign.

Now my team and I don't mind critiques of our work, whether it's billboards or books or anything else. We all have a lot to learn and we need to value each other's insights.

Nor do we mind people correcting us if there wasn't enough communication. From the start of our ministry, as I mentioned above, we have invested a lot of time and money into communicating and consulting. In fact, I like the motto, "Over-communicate!"

But what was disturbing about the bishops' concerns – and those who worked for them – was the heavy-handed, controlling attitude that they displayed. This was my first real exposure to that, and there would be a lot more to come. And it continues to this day.

We are a Catholic ministry, carried out by both priests and laity, and are loyal to the Church. (In Church law, we were at this point what is called a "private association of the faithful.") But that's the point. It's an association *of the faithful*, not simply of the hierarchy. God's people, informed by Church teaching and moved by his Spirit, have the right to associate and work together to apply their skills, knowledge and resources to advance one or another aspect of God's Kingdom. Marching orders don't have to flow from one's pastor or bishop. In fact, the Second Vatican Council made that very clear, multiple times, as when they said, "*The laity derive the right and duty to the apostolate from their union with Christ the head; incorporated into Christ's Mystical Body through Baptism and strengthened by the power of the Holy Spirit through Confirmation, they are assigned to the apostolate by the Lord Himself*" (Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity, n.3).

So we had a legitimate autonomy, and a lot of supporters who were giving us millions of dollars to do pro-life work that they and we saw fit. We weren't violating any Catholic teaching.

But it seemed that the bishops couldn't tolerate a big, successful ministry that was carrying out an idea that didn't originate with them and their experts.

Again, I respect them and their experts and was consulting widely. But that's why it was so confusing and hurtful when that fact was given no recognition, and I was told that we had to a) stop the Campaign, b) take down the billboards that had already been paid for and gone up, and c) from now on use (with our money, of course) the billboards that the bishops had designed. And the official from the Bishop's conference wrote, "

Interesting approach. "We have something better. So promote what we have, using the team you have put together and the resources your supporters have given you."

5. So it sounds like you were looking for collaboration but they were looking for control.

Exactly. Their response to our project wasn't an invitation to dialog or to let them know more about why we were doing what we did. It was a "we're right, you're wrong, and we're in charge" attitude, a claiming of the monopoly on the message of healing after abortion.

A few years later, St. John Paul II wrote in *The Gospel of Life*, “No single person or group has a monopoly on the defence and promotion of life. These are everyone’s task and responsibility” (EV #91).

Also noteworthy is that the bishops’ own [Pastoral Plan for Pro-life Activities](#), which came out the same year that all of this was happening (2001), states, “We seek the collaboration of every Catholic organization in this effort,” and in the section on promoting healing, they say, “Other post-abortion ministries that involve support groups and retreats are also available in many areas.”

Interestingly, however, right after that sentence, their guidance stops short of referring the parishes to those “other ministries.” Notice where the quote ends:

“Every church-sponsored program and identifiably Catholic organization and agency should know where to refer those in need of post-abortion healing. Special resources to assist priests in this ministry are available from the Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities and from many diocesan pro-life offices.”

This reveals an attitude that came out in many other ways over the years. For instance, the term “Project Rachel” is used to refer to efforts a Catholic diocese undertakes to offer healing to those wounded by abortion. While the USCCB website says, “Project Rachel is a ministry of the Catholic Church in the U.S. to those who have been involved in abortion” (emphasis added), the implication that there are other such ministries in the Church is absent in what some diocesan websites say:

[“Project Rachel](#) is **the** U.S Catholic Church’s abortion healing ministry.”

[“Project Rachel](#) is **the outreach** of the Catholic church to those who are suffering this loss.”

[“Project Rachel](#) is **the** U.S. Catholic Church’s ministry to those who have been involved in abortion.” (emphases added)

My point is not to criticize these ministries in the least; these people deserve our praise, gratitude and support, and I refer people to them all the time. My point, rather, is that *words matter* and the message being conveyed by the quotes above is bad ecclesiology. The *Church* is bigger than the *diocese* and bigger than the *bishops’ conference*. The diocese, and the USCCB, are structures meant to *serve* the Church. But the Church is the People of God, in wonderful variety, responding to a multitude of gifts of the Spirit. Indeed, one of those gifts is precisely the hierarchical structure we have. But it’s one gift among many.

A healthy ecclesiology, and a healthy Church, is one in which – as the Second Vatican Council, the Catechism and the Code of Canon Law teach us -- everyone learns from one another, respects how the Spirit is working in one another, acknowledges a wide variety of ministries, and does not seek to monopolize, control or cancel the good work others are doing. (*For a great discussion of this, see the book “Nothing to Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Catholic Church,” written by Russell Shaw, former Communications Director for the national bishops’ conference (2008: Ignatius Press). For some specific references, see Vatican II, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium) n. 43 and St. Paul VI encyclical Ecclesiam Suam, nos. 115-116.*)

The unhealthy ecclesiology was reflected in a very telling way at one of the “Vigil for Life” masses the night before the annual March for Life in Washington, DC. Cardinal William Keeler was head of the bishops’ Pro-life Committee, and in that role, was celebrant and homilist at the Mass, held in the Basilica Shrine of the Immaculate Conception. At that time, the first few rows of one of the sections of pews in

the front of the Basilica was reserved for Priests for Life leaders – including us at Priests for Life, leaders of National Right to Life, and other groups, as well as directors of the various diocesan respect life offices.

But when in his remarks the Cardinal referred to the people sitting in those pews, he only mentioned that they were the representatives of the diocesan respect life offices.

On a subsequent occasion, and as another example, someone who was privy to a conversation with one of the USCCB officials told me that this particular bureaucrat told him, *“Yes, we’re doing pretty well in the pro-life arena, despite Frank Pavone.”*

This attitude played out in how we were treated in regard to the annual conference that the Bishops’ conference had for the people who directed pro-life activity on behalf of each diocese. In the early years of my Priests for Life work, I was welcomed to these conferences. For some of that time, in fact, I was also working at the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for the Family, and I brought my insights from that work into the meetings. Because my Priests for Life team and I were constantly traveling to speak in the various dioceses at their invitation, most of the directors themselves were so enthusiastic to see me and interact with me.

But then, as we continued to grow, things changed. We weren’t invited anymore. In fact, we were told that no “outside” groups were allowed to come. (The meaning of “outside” was not clarified.) The ranks were closing. Only the bureaucracy could guide the directors. In fact, when in group discussion some of the more experienced directors offered to mentor some of the newer ones, the bureaucrats running the conference said no, the directors should consult with the USCCB Secretariat for Pro-life Activities (i.e. them), not one another.

Fast forwarding ahead a bit, it was in 2011 when Dr. Theresa Burke, by that time a pastoral associate of Priests for Life (because Rachel’s Vineyard had entered into a special partnership with Priests for Life which endures to this day and I became Pastoral Director for its work throughout the world), was invited to speak at the Vatican to the Pontifical Academy for Life. She told them about Rachel’s Vineyard. Our Executive Director and I were there as well (I was an official member of the Academy), and we were received by Pope Benedict, who greeted each one of us.

The Pope’s remarks included these words,

“It is necessary -- as has been indicated in your works -- to provide the necessary help to women who sadly have already taken recourse to abortion, and who now experience all its moral and existential tragedy. There are many initiatives, at the diocesan level or through individual volunteer entities, which offer psychological and spiritual support for a complete human recovery. The solidarity of the Christian community cannot give up this type of co-responsibility.”

But again, a key advisor to the US Bishops’ conference who was there contradicted that spirit of solidarity. When Dr. Burke told this person how successful Rachel’s Vineyard had become, the person said, “Yes, and we’re not happy about that,” and further indicated that steps would be taken to change that. (By the way, we’re still the largest ministry in the world for healing after abortion.)

So how we were treated by the US bishops' bureaucracy in response to our effort to spread the message of the Church's healing was a perfect application of the declaration that "Project Rachel is **the Catholic Church's abortion healing ministry.**" Period. Amen. Nothing else to see here, folks.

6. How was the matter finally resolved?

My board and I cooperated with the bishops, although at first, Cardinal Keeler didn't give me a chance... I was on the road constantly, and because I didn't respond to one of his letters immediately (it was at the office; I wasn't), he *wrote to all the bishops about my lack of cooperation* before I could even get back to my desk to read his letter.

Once I did, I set things in motion to stop using the billboards we had made. The bishops' pro-life committee and I issued a joint press release saying we were happy to work together. Our bishop advisors congratulated me on doing a good job at resolving the matter.

But the bureaucrats at the bishops' conference continued to badmouth our work, including in Rome, as I reference above.