

One month into the AOD – Voris/RCTV matter: some observations

JUST OVER A MONTH has passed since the [AOD – Voris/RCTV matter](#) unleashed a flash flood of cyber-commentary. Much of that commentary struck me as thinly reasoned and off-point (and occasionally, *ad hominem*), but amid it all some reasonable questions surfaced, too. While debates attempted without agreed-upon rules or recognized referees (i.e., internet debates!), can never be ‘won’ or ‘lost’, good can nevertheless come from assisting others to think through certain issues rather than watching them simply react to them. To that end, my personal observations on this matter, now that things have calmed down a bit, may follow.

Canon 216 states that “no undertaking is to claim the name *Catholic* without the consent of the competent ecclesiastical authority.” Now, among the many reacting to the AOD statements on Voris/RCTV and Canon 216, no one, it seems, seriously questions *that* canon law prohibits *any* undertaking from assuming the name “Catholic” without prior ecclesiastical authorization, and no one, it seems, suggests that Voris/RCTV *have* such permission from the AOD or, apparently, from anyone else. So what, exactly, has the flurry of commentary been about?

As far as I can tell, it’s been about nearly everything *except* what canon law requires of the Christian faithful before claiming the name “Catholic” for their undertakings: *ecclesiastical permission*. Against the AOD statements have been arrayed protestations of Voris/RCTV’s orthodoxy, counters that heterodox groups use the name “Catholic” with impunity, complaints that dissident groups known to be Catholic are not being corrected, objections that the AOD had no ‘jurisdiction’ to issue its statements about Voris/RCTV, consternation that many small Catholic initiatives will have to change their names, insinuations that a cabal of curial hold-outs from the 1970s have it in for Voris personally, that the AOD is bankrupt, that some critics of Voris/RCTV are tools of the Evil One, and so on. As I said, *everything* seems relevant, except what canon law actually *says* about this situation, namely, that no undertaking is to assume the name *Catholic* without the prior consent of ecclesiastical authority.

So, again, even though I think the clarity of Canon 216 puts everything else in shadow, as noted above, it might be instructive for some if we look at these reactions more closely

(a) protestations of Voris/RCTV’s orthodoxy

I think this assertion largely true, but irrelevant. Why? Because Canon 216 embraces “any undertaking” not just “any undertaking *that seems to be heterodox*”. Most of what Voris/RCTV produces would probably pass doctrinal muster, but that happy fact counts for little in the face of the undoubted canonical requirement to secure ecclesiastical permission *before* claiming the title “Catholic” for an undertaking. Consider: regardless of how safe an appliance actually is, a manufacturer mayn’t attach the UL approval seal to its product until UL says it can. Similarly, it doesn’t matter how orthodox an undertaking is, it mayn’t confer the title “Catholic” on its operations and products unless and until ecclesiastical authority says it can.

Further: some seem to think that, provided the ‘verbal content’ of a message is free of doctrinal error, it qualifies, or should very quickly qualify, for ecclesiastical approval. Not so fast. The Church’s duty to safeguard the “catholicity” of the Good News is about more than making

sure that a given religious message can pass a theology exam. The *catholicity* of an undertaking is not only about *what* is said, it's also about *how* things are said; it's about the balance achieved (or not) while saying it, it's about what topics are chosen for treatment, and why, and what topics are not talked about, and why not. *All* of these considerations, and many others besides, combine to form, as experts in the media know, a unified message, and *all* of them impact on the *Catholic* character of content proclaimed as being *really Catholic*.

It is, of course, very difficult to incorporate so many diverse considerations into the planning for and operation of an undertaking concerned with, of all things, broadcast news, religious and social commentary, and opinions on current events and culture. Much better, I think, to leave human genius to work out such emphases and nuances for itself. But to expressly and repeatedly and prominently claim the title "Catholic" (nay *Real Catholic!*) for a significant media undertaking like that described above is *to force* ecclesiastical authority to take notice of that undertaking. Exactly as happened here.

A further point: We've all seen the disregard for ecclesiastical authority shown by certain enterprises using the name "Catholic" in their titles, groups such as the [National Catholic Reporter](#) and [Catholics for a Free Choice](#). Those in charge of such undertakings will someday have to render an accounting for, among other things, the scandal they give in claiming the name "Catholic" for their agenda despite express ecclesiastical reprobation. That said, though, how many take seriously the claim of such groups to be "Catholic" in any authentic sense of the word? Time after time these groups convey disregard for fundamental Church teachings and show disrespect for the pronouncements of Church authority. In the pursuit of their own views, such groups are, I think, caricatures of the word "Catholic."

But that cannot be said of Voris/RCTV. Not yet certainly. Most of what Voris/RCTV actually say is (or seems to me) orthodox, if often abrasively so. Voris/RCTV recognizes hierarchical authority in the Church and asserts the obligation of Catholics to obey that authority. Thus, though few seem taken in by NCREP's or CFFC's claim to be Catholic, many *will* accept Voris/RCTV's claim to be Catholic, and *really Catholic* at that, which very conclusion, however, the local Church, charged by Christ the Lord with preservation of His Gospel *whole and entire, in matter and manner*, must weigh in on as long as her holy name is being continually invoked as the guarantor of Voris/RCTV's views and their manner of expressing them.

Thus two questions arise in succession: if Voris/RCTV may act without regard for the terms of Canon 216, who, I wonder, need heed it? Further, given the nugatory protection of the word "Catholic" accorded to the Church under *civil* law, if Catholics are free to observe Canon 216, or not, as suits their own view of the greater good, just what legal protection of her own name is left for the Catholic Church? The answer, it seems, is none.

(b) heterodox groups use the name Catholic with impunity,

Partially true, partially false, but mostly irrelevant.

Some undertakings using the word Catholic in their title have permission to use it. [Catholic Answers](#) in San Diego is an example. Other undertakings claiming the title Catholic removed the word when asked/directed to do so by ecclesiastical authority, e.g. [The Bellarmine Theo-](#)

[logical Forum](#) (*olim*, Catholic Apologetics International). And many fine undertakings by Catholics avoid for themselves and the Church the peculiar complications of Canon 216 by simply *not* using the word “Catholic” for their title (*Our Sunday Visitor*, the Knights of Columbus, Women for Faith and Family, “In the Light of the Law”, and so on). Is the Catholic character of these undertakings in some doubt because they do not claim the title Catholic?

Still, some heterodox projects do claim the name/title Catholic and have not been the subject of express correction by ecclesiastical authority. What of that? As a fact of ecclesiastical life, I find the point interesting; but as an excuse against having to comply with Canon 216 when one is subject to it, I think the point fails. We’ve all gotten a traffic ticket and, while waiting for the citation to be issued, have wondered “Why me? There are so many worse drivers out there than me!” Maybe there are. But a few seconds’ reflection suffices to show how little that argument will accomplish in traffic court, and a few minutes’ more reflection usually suffices to show that drivers doing exactly what I am being ticketed for, in fact, cause serious accidents and hurt innocent people, even if they didn’t mean to.

(c) dissident groups known to be Catholic are not being corrected,

Partially true, partially false, but, again, mostly irrelevant.

The assertion is extremely broad in scope and can’t be completely responded to here, but here goes. First, that not every aberrant group (regardless of whether they claim the name Catholic) is immediately corrected by Church authority, is a fact of ecclesial life that dates to the Ancient Church (Mt 13: 24-30). Second, if one wants to argue that relatively more such instances obtain today than in other periods of Church history, I’m open to the evidence. But if one wants to say, third, that the neglect of the Catholic title and identity of various groups that was so typical of the decades following Vatican II, continues unabated today, I will disagree. In the last five or ten years, I’ve seen more ecclesiastical push-back against groups unilaterally claiming the name/identity of Catholic than I’ve seen in 30 years previous. Any fair-minded observer should agree. If reasonable minds may differ about whether there has yet been enough push-back, *that* things are changing is indisputable.

Further, not every problem in the Church is equal to every other problem in the Church. Higher profile projects tend to get more official attention, and sooner, than do lower profile undertakings. Prioritizing among various issues, and allocating very limited Church resources to deal with them, is the responsibility of ecclesiastical authority, *and of no one else*. That is not to say, of course, that observers cannot form opinions about ecclesiastical priorities that differ from those of ecclesiastical authority; it is not even to say that they cannot, in accord with [Canon 212 § 3](#), prudently and charitably express those views. But I see more at work in the writings of some critics of the AOD: condemnation of the AOD statement, repudiation of its authority, and the imputation of evil motives to it.

Finally, not every ‘Catholic identity’ issue is primarily a *Canon 216* issue. Some undertakings are more directly treated by canons dealing with, say, juridic personality (c. [116](#)), associations of the faithful (c. [300](#)), or Catholic educational concerns (cc. [803](#), [808](#)). In other words, just because one does not see Canon 216 expressly invoked in a given case, does not mean that questions of Catholic identity are not being dealt with.

(d) the AOD has no ‘jurisdiction’ to issue its statement about Voris/RCTV,

This has been a particularly odd argument to see offered in the blogosphere. The plain directive of Canon 216 is almost universally missed therein, but we’re to rely on bloggers to parse the minutiae of canonical jurisdiction? I may be forgiven, I trust, for declining to offer an on-line tutorial on Book VII of the Code and, since I express my own opinions only, folks are free to accept or reject my assertion (that the AOD has the authority to act as it has acted) as they wish. Another forum will decide whether the AOD has jurisdiction to do what it has done. I’m content to let that forum render, if things come to that, a decision in due course.

In the meantime, may I raise a question I’ve not seen floated yet?

Some have asserted that Marc Brammer, a Catholic residing in the diocese of Ft. Wayne - South Bend, represents the *sole and exclusive* point of ecclesiastical jurisdiction over RCTV. Assume, for the sake of argument, that that’s true. What jurisdiction, I wonder, could the Church (*anywhere*, for that matter) claim over the “Real Catholic TV” if Brammer were *not* Catholic? Per the ‘Brammer or Bust’ school, I suggest, *none at all* (cc. [1](#), [11](#))! Is it *seriously* to be contended that a local Church has *no* authority over local Catholics writing, editing, producing, and promoting extensive media programming copiously labeled as “Catholic” this and “Catholic” that, if the registered owner of the enterprise happens, conveniently, not to be Catholic? For that matter, what if Brammer were to transfer his interest in RCTV to a non-Catholic, or to a conglomerate, maybe one overseas, or if he or another utilize(d) any of a half dozen id-masking options common in cyberspace? Whither ecclesiastical jurisdiction over something like “Real Catholic TV” then? People should stop to think about how solutions that suit their view of one case would, if actually adopted, impact the Church’s ability to handle others.

(e) consternation that many small Catholic initiatives will have to change their names,

I don’t know how many small initiatives by Catholics use the word “Catholic” in their title nor, of those that do, how many have no authorization for it. Let’s assume, lots. If the Voris/RCTV matter is a wake-up call against slapping the label “Catholic” on every activity carried on by Catholics, fine by me. But, as a practical matter, I doubt that ecclesiastical authority is going to see grandma’s blog, “Catholic Cookies and Milk”, wherein she recounts what’s being read by the parish book club and how much her cats hate the snow, as topping their to-do list. If, later, though, CC&M morphs into a multi-million dollar broadcast operation self-appointed to expose lies and falsehoods among Catholics and throughout the world, I might reconsider.

(f) insinuations that a cabal of curial holdouts from the 1970s have it in for Voris personally, that the AOD is bankrupt, that some critics of Voris/RCTV are tools of the Evil One, and so on, and so on

Resort to name-calling speaks for itself. As for me, in the early 1970s I was worrying about getting cut from my high school track team; by the late ‘70s, I was wondering what LSAT scores would get me into law school.