

## The Post Vatican II Crisis and the Birth of the Communications Office

By Roy Gasnick, OFM

1969: Four years after the Second Vatican Council; two years after the Extraordinary General Chapter to reform and renew the entire Franciscan Order. The year Holy Name Province ended its own two-year Extraordinary Chapter for Reform and Renewal. The Province was headed by a young, visionary Provincial, **Finian Kerwin, OFM**, who had seized the moment and was quickly steering the Province away from its rigid Tridentine past and into the brave new but uncertain world of its Vatican II future.

But the boldness of that venture came at a cost: a divided Province. At the very beginning of our Extraordinary Chapter, friars took sides, aligning themselves between the old guard and the new guard, those who resisted the Vatican II changes and those who relished them. The Extraordinary Chapter many times erupted into bitter exchanges and sometimes mutual charges of infidelity to the Church.

In between the two sessions of the Chapter, Finian and his Councilors engaged the firm of Booz, Allen and Hamilton to do a survey of the friars to determine the strong and weak spots of Provincial structures. In their written report to the Extraordinary Chapter, the firm singled out the lack of proper communication channels as one the Province's greatest needs. They reported that the friars generally relied more on widespread gossip than on official information provided by the Provincial Administration. Therefore, they strongly recommended that the Province establish a full-fledged communications office.

Finian and his Councilors turned to me. At the time, I was already working in the Provincial Office as head of the Third Order (Secular Franciscan) Province and had two years of experience in helping the Third Order to rediscover its lay Franciscan roots. One of my tools was an imaginative, colorful newsletter, *Good News*, which was sent out to all the members of the Third Order Province each month. I was already a published writer, had taught basic writing courses at St. Bonaventure University and had become associated with the journalism school and *The Bona Venture* newspaper there.

But I had no models in the Church to imitate. From the Vatican down to the smallest parish, no such thing as a communication office ever existed. Knowing the strong resistance to the changes coming about in the Province as well as the skepticism and hostility the old guard had for the Provincial Administration, I knew that the fledgling Communications Office had to take as bold a direction as that of Finian Kerwin had in leading the Province.

I began by merely continuing the monthly newsletter **Giles Bello, OFM**, then Provincial Secretary, had begun. I changed the type of news, giving more in-depth notices of what was happening in the Provincial Administration and adding stories about personal accomplishments of friars in the Province.

After a few months, I had to sit down with the Finian to outline my plans. The office would not be a public relations medium; it had to communicate honestly and accurately everything the Provincial Administration was doing and why.

I had to have free access to all necessary information, especially Provincial Council meeting minutes, the Provincial's outgoing mail and other such materials that guaranteed I could be an objective communicator to the friars. Finian quickly granted those and other such guarantees, and he assured me that there were no holds barred for me to set up a model communications office.

That task was huge, especially in those pre-computer days. I then asked **Cassian Miles, OFM**, to join me. Cassian had been a professional journalist before he entered the Order and we had worked together on *The Cord and Cowl* magazine at the minor seminary in Callicoon, N.Y.

He and I formed a perfect team. My strengths were his weaknesses and my weaknesses were his strengths. We even were able to rewrite each other's writings without pride ever interfering.

We renamed the office The Franciscan Communications Office of New York to avoid the immediate taint of provincialism in our external communications ministry.

Then we changed the newsletter to a weekly publication, *This Week*, and mailed it to the friars of the Province in such a sequence that every friar received it every Monday. We devised an unusual format, letter-sized pages folded length wise, which a friar could easily fold and tuck into his pocket and read at odd moments of his day. The articles were kept brief, sort of like the style *USA Today* later developed, but containing all the essential information.

Early on, Cassian came to me noting that we had set up channels for objective communications from the Administration, but what about a voice for the friars? Hence *Forum* was born, a separate letter to the Province publication in which any friar could freely raise questions, make criticisms or just make comments about the state of the Province — all unedited. It was open to all friars, even novices and those simply professed.

*Forum* on many occasions raised firestorms, some in the Provincial Administration and some in other quarters of the Province's ministries. Despite an occasional attempt by a Provincial to suppress a letter, we prevailed in the name of freedom of the press, and the letter in question went to press.

To handle Provincial matters that required in-depth study, we devised a simple format called *Special Report*.

*Close Up*, another publication, came into being when Finian Kerwin sent me to each of our foreign missions to remind the stateside friars of the importance of the missions to our Franciscan heritage. I taped interviews with every friar in a particular mission (Brazil, for example) and then wrote a *Close Up* publication using mostly the words of the friars themselves. I may have shaped the story, but the emphasis was on giving the missionary friars the right to describe their own ministry.

There was another major function of the office, one that became equally important to our internal communications: media and public relations. With the help of a consultant, James C.G. Conniff, we built up formidable good relations with both the local (metropolitan New York area) and national press and TV outlets, both religious and secular. This was a huge and highly successful operation involving a kind of public relations that was uniquely Franciscan. But that's another story to be told.

As Cassian and I grew in the handling of then current media expertise, diocesan and religious media organizations came to recognize and admire our office. Two General Ministers, John Vaughn, OFM, and Hermann Shaluck, OFM, publicly praised Holy Name Province's Communications Office as the best in the entire Order. That praise was probably behind my appointment as the director of communications for the OFM English-speaking Conference of Franciscan Provincials, a position I held from 1980 until 1987.

Cassian and I continued in the office under two other Provincial Ministers until 1985, when I left to work with the audio/visual and movie production company, Franciscan Communications, in Los Angeles. Cassian succeeded me as director. We both have happy memories – and some scars – in knowing our efforts helped the Province move into the Vatican II religious world we enjoy today.