



Let there be (Salt) Light

Article

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Special to The Star

Call it the little network that could. Maybe with a divine nudge.

In the only-God-knows-how-many-channel universe, Canada's first homegrown national Catholic television network is that rarity in broadcasting: a success story.

In the nearly seven years it has been on the air, Toronto-based Salt + Light Television has grown to 25 employees, with around-the-clock programming, original productions (37 in-house documentaries to date), a radio station, a Chinese division, a magazine, a website that streams the network to as many as 40 countries, and an annual budget of \$3 million. There's even a satellite office in Montreal.

It's a far cry from the two-person operation in the cramped downtown Toronto office of World Youth Day that rebroadcast a lone signal from the Vatican.

Back in July 2002, World Youth Day drew nearly 200,000 young Roman Catholic pilgrims from around the world to Toronto for a week of festivities, worship and service projects, all highlighted by Pope John Paul II's visit. The theme of the event was taken from the book of Matthew: "You are the salt of the earth . . . you are the light of the world."

The groundswell of Catholic spirituality in the event's wake led many young people to a variety of commitments, and also to the establishment of Salt + Light Television, the first such effort on the Canadian media landscape.

Initially broadcasting only in the Toronto area, the network is now carried by cable and satellite TV providers across Canada. Programs — in English, French, some Italian, Mandarin and Cantonese — are available to millions of Canadian homes. Some Salt + Light programming also reaches the United States.

In the Toronto area, it is available on Rogers channel 240; 654 on Bell TV, 160 on Shaw, and 185 on Cogeco. There are no hard, Nielson rating-type numbers on viewership, but the network says demand, based on feedback from the cable companies, has been steady.

The growth has been undeniable. And the potential is huge: There are 13 million Roman Catholics in Canada; the Archdiocese of Toronto tallies 1.85 million within its boundaries.

The Pope and youthful enthusiasm may have provided the inspiration for Salt + Light, but the heavy lifting was done by Gaetano Gagliano, an Italian immigrant who started a print shop in his basement 55 years ago and built it into Canada's largest privately owned communications company.

The founder of St. Joseph Communications, with holdings in magazines, marketing and printing, Gagliano was 86 years old in 2002 when he approached Father Thomas Rosica, then winding down as national director of World Youth Day, to get Salt + Light on the air. A license from the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) had been

acquired the year before.

"It was always my father's dream to give Catholics an opportunity to get closer to their faith by telling, through broadcast, positive, hopeful, inspirational stories to give people a better understanding of their faith, a better understanding of their lives and a better opportunity to connect with that faith," said Gaetano's son, Tony Gagliano, CEO of St. Joseph Communications.

The network went live on July 1, 2003. "It was me and a man running the machines," recalled Rosica, the network's CEO. "We were just taking the Vatican feed from Italy."

From its current headquarters on Richmond Street East, Salt + Light still broadcasts Vatican goings-on, daily mass and other devotional services. But its most popular programs are Witness, an interview show with religious and civic leaders; Perspectives, a 30-minute discussion on that week's hot topics; and Catholic Focus, which has tackled such controversial issues as stem cell research, the Church and AIDS, and Catholic-Islamic relations.

Rosica, a tireless Basilian priest who was appointed a consultant to the Vatican's communications council in 2009, stressed that Salt + Light is not the Vatican's PR arm and has not shied from thorny issues that continue to rankle Catholics. Programs have also focused on the sex-abuse scandal, euthanasia, abortion and the role of Pope Pius XII during the Holocaust.

The May 1 beatification of Pope John Paul is expected to draw the network's largest audience to date. Also in the works is a three-part documentary on Pope Benedict's stand on ecology and the environment.

"There's no involvement from the institutional church and we're not a good news agency," Rosica said. "The Church doesn't have the means, access or capability of doing that kind of stuff. We're taking stories and going in-depth with them. We never set ourselves up in opposition to something or someone. We're an alternative to what's out there on television.

"But the unique thing is, we have the full support of the Church."

Do some Catholics complain of their proverbial dirty linen being aired in public?

"Oh, yeah, all the time," Rosica said. "There's a certain form of Taliban Catholicism out there right now that would like to dictate everything and, really, it doesn't speak to the future.

"We uphold the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church and respectfully differ with those who do not share our views."

For example, in the pro-life controversy that swirled around U.S. Sen. Edward Kennedy's funeral in 2009, Rosica said Salt + Light refused to allow the network to be "manipulated and hijacked by a radical fringe of people who asked that we join in and lead the condemnation of the cardinal of Boston for hosting Kennedy's funeral in a Catholic Church.

"There are many people who claim to be Catholic and faithful to Christ and the Church," Rosica said. "They know little of Christian behaviour."

A registered charity, Salt + Light is funded by private donations, and 2009 was a banner year: A \$1 million gift from the Hilary M. Weston Foundation for Youth, \$500,000 from the Knights of Columbus, and \$50,000 from the Demarais family and Power Corp. in Montreal. A gala dinner that year raised an additional \$300,000.

Another popular Catholic outlet, Eternal Word Television Network (EWTN), is also available in Canada. But Bell TV announced recently that it will drop EWTN from its lineup as of Feb. 27. A Bell spokeswoman told the Catholic Register that EWTN "had a low viewership" and Salt + Light is a "strong alternative."

The resulting uproar prompted Rosica to issue a statement on a Salt + Light blog that Bell's decision to drop EWTN was "not part of an anti-Catholic conspiracy."

For years, single-faith television programming in Canada was mired in regulatory roadblocks stemming from concerns that allowing one religion airtime would further such un-Canadian values as intolerance and parochialism.

That changed in 1993 when the CRTC amended its rules to allow the licensing of single-faith services, provided they commit to "balance." Salt + Light achieves some of its balance through its interfaith programs, Rosica said.

Both Rosica and Gagliano admit to a steep learning curve, as neither had worked in television.

"I have a TV for the first time!" Rosica exclaimed. "(When) the guy came to install the (cable) box, I told him, 'Can you just set it up for CNN, CBC and Salt + Light?'"