

Like a Time-Release Capsule



Special Report

Salt + Light Television, which came out of World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto, is still going strong.

By Kathy Shaidle

The organizers of World Youth Day 2002 in Toronto had computed the logistics, double-checked the protocol, and considered every eventuality. For instance, they knew they had to shelter, feed, and hydrate hundreds of thousands of pilgrims, some 25,000 volunteers, and “the founder of the feast” himself, Pope John Paul II.

And given the history of major international get-togethers dating back to the 1960s, that handful of Cuban defectors begging for Canadian asylum couldn’t really be considered a surprise. The WYD committee even inked a \$4.5-million contract for 7,000 Porta-Potties, destined for the vast grounds set aside for the closing papal mass.

The committee could never have anticipated the trouble one discarded plastic raincoat would cause. At that papal Mass up at Downsview Park, an estimated 800,000 pilgrims prayed, cheered, and made a rather un-Canadian mess. Among the debris: an abandoned raincoat that somehow made its way from inside a Porta-Potty into the city’s waste system. The resulting back-up diverted 32,000 liters of raw sewage into a nearby retail furniture complex, resulting in \$16-million in highly publicized damages.

The scenario was ripe for media mockery. Yet surprisingly little occurred. By the time the furniture store celebrated its grand reopening six months later, the average Torontonians had forgotten the embarrassing, expensive disaster.

In the months leading up to World Youth Day, Canadian Catholics had been apprehensive about the media coverage, and not just on account of the innocent ignorance mainstream journalists display when reporting on matters Catholic. Canadian Catholics had additional grounds for concern: in the 1980s, the Canadian Church weathered the first of many scandals that were later rock the rest of the world, when news broke about decades-old sexual abuse allegations centered around Newfoundland’s Mount Cashel orphanage. Nearly 20 years later, almost every Canadian news story or opinion column concerning the Catholic Church (however innocuous or elementary) still seemed to include an obligatory allusion to Mount Cashel.

Hosting World Youth Day in Toronto finally gave the Church in Canada a precious opportunity to stage a wholesome, scandal-free event, bringing young laypeople together under the Catholic umbrella. In the end, not even that toxic closing ceremony disaster undermined the generally respectful tone of the media’s coverage. At worst, secular reporters came off sounding like naïve anthropologists. (A writer for the glossy magazine *Toronto Life* expressed amazement after spotting pilgrims—recognizable by their ubiquitous WYD backpacks—cavorting downtown, laughing, singing, shyly flirting, and even smoking.)

Much of the credit for the success of WYD, both the event itself and the non-Catholic reaction to it, goes to Father Tom Rosica. The then-43-year-old Basilian polyglot—fluent in French, Italian, German, and Spanish—had been the long-time executive director of the University of Toronto’s Newman Center before the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops tapped him to serve as the CEO of World Youth Day.

As a relatively young, articulate priest, Rosica was already known to Canadian journalists as that cooperative cleric who could be relied upon to provide a thoughtful quote or write a timely op-ed. Rosica wasn’t hostile, tone deaf, or defensive. He returned phone calls and understood the concept of deadlines.

Under Rosica’s leadership, World Youth Day 2002 was an unqualified success. Soon afterwards, the big question became: How could Catholic Canadians keep the event’s spirit alive and channel all that unleashed youthful energy into something permanent?

Reflecting on those heady times, Rosica told Catholic World Report:

The events of July 2002 in Canada were not an end or accomplishment of some feat; but rather the beginning of a new adventure of faith and hope for the entire Canadian Church. One thing was clear after World Youth Day 2002: We realized that we have much work to do in reaching out to young adults across this vast land.

We had numerous challenges to overcome: the immense distances in our country that lead to isolationism and loneliness, the languages of English and French, several distinctly different societies and cultures (French, Quebec, Native, English, etc.), and great indifference on the part of many.

Rosica’s vision for WYD had always been to stage the precise opposite of “a show, a rave party, a protest, or photo opportunity. It was an invitation.



Against a global background of terror and fear, economic collapse in many countries, and ecclesial scandals, World Youth Day 2002 presented a bold, alternative vision of compelling beauty, hope, and joy.”

Only when it ended did Rosica realize just how revolutionary the event had been. It quickly became apparent that World Youth Day 2002 had taken on an organic life of its own.

“I have often compared World Youth Day 2002 to a time-release capsule of holy energy and creativity that is slowly releasing its energy and power across our land,” Rosica recalled. “Little did we know...that this great adventure would become the foundation for Salt + Light Television.”

FILLING A NEED

Religious television programming in Canada had been, up until then, an ad hoc, patchwork affair: low-budget, low-rated Sunday offerings like Mass for Shut-Ins were well-intentioned, but didn’t attract young eyeballs. With its venerable program Man Alive, national broadcaster CBC granted religion a mere one hour a week.

By 2003, the nation’s only two faith-focused channels had already carved out their respective niches: CTS Television (launched in 1998), blended current affairs, televangelism, and family-friendly US sitcoms under a mostly conservative Protestant umbrella; its predecessor, VISION-TV, showcased multicultural, multi-faith original programming, subsidized by sponsor-bait re-runs of old British comedies.

In that atmosphere, Rosica and many others felt that Canada’s 12 million Catholics were being underserved. From the start, Rosica’s concept for a challenging new Canadian channel called Salt + Light Television was inspired by the WYD paradox: an ancient Church energized by contemporary youth, and pointing the way to a hope-filled future.

Unlike many misbegotten Christian “youth ministry” projects, WYD under Rosica’s leadership encouraged young participants to be leaders, not just obedient followers. Empowerment wasn’t just preached; it was practiced. Today, many Salt + Light staffers are former WYD pilgrims; the atmosphere inside Salt + Light’s downtown Toronto studios is younger and “hipper” than what passes for typical in most Catholic organizations.

“What is fascinating,” Rosica explains, is that the channel “was inspired by two elderly men in the twilight of their lives. One was an uneducated and very wise Italian immigrant in Canada named Gaetano Gagliano, founder of St. Joseph Media, the largest, private print and media group in Canada, who had a passion for evangelization through the media, and the other, an elderly, Polish Pope in Rome who, at the end of his pontificate, became a hero for young people.”

However, Rosica adds, the channel stringently avoids the trendy “relevance” that dooms too many youth-oriented endeavors.

“We must avoid the great danger of chasing after relevance,” Rosica observes. “Some people work so hard to be relevant that they spin hopelessly into irrelevance.”

Again, a balance must be struck between the old and the new, he says.

“Rather than fleeing the confusion and ambiguity of our age, and hiding in the nostalgia of a past that is now buried in the heart and mercy of God, we have chosen to remain in the city, in the present, in the thick of things, offering the world the solid message of the gospel, the teaching of the Church, a ray of hope, and a dose of badly needed joy,” he explains. “The world needs Salt + Light Television now more than ever.”

The new channel’s name was taken from the theme of WYD 2002: Jesus’ words in the Gospel of Matthew: “You are the salt of the earth...You are the light of the world.”

Rosica explains:

In his famous sermon on the Galilean hillside, Jesus transfers his light to those who follow him...To follow the Lord Jesus, to be salt and light for the world, to bring the world the flavor of the Gospel and the light of Christ, is as real as it gets. Salt + Light Television draws from the past and offers a vision of the New Jerusalem, of living stones, of the youthful Church of Jesus Christ that is “alive and young,” as Pope Benedict XVI said so beautifully at the beginning of his pontificate.

Having an ambitious vision is one thing, but building a brand new television channel literally from the ground up is quite another. Canadian broadcasting regulations are daunting and, critics complain, arbitrary. Then there is the question of capital.

Rosica is candid. “In Canada, there is a great sense of entitlement in people, especially among Catholics,” he says. “When we seek funds, the response is often: ‘Let the Church pay! Let the Pope pay for the television network. Let the bishops pay.’ Salt + Light is a unique opportunity for Catholics to take responsibility for ‘the Church,’ for catechesis, and be generous with this instrument of the New Evangelization. While many individuals and communities have been very generous with us, many more have yet to assist us. The more people realize what we are doing, the more generous I hope they will be with us.”

Canadians aren’t immune to an understandable temperamental quirk common among Christians in the United States as well. For them, the mainstream media (with its ignorance about or hostility towards anything Christian) is like the weather: Christians complain, but no one does anything about it.

Rosica, in contrast, wanted to alter the media landscape.

“I learned through the World Youth Day adventure in Canada where the real power is found in the media establishment,” he says. “It is not in provocative media statements, breaking news moments or media hype and scoops, but rather in the Rolodex of names on the desk of journalists, editors, producers, and chasers of the big agencies, networks, and newspapers. Change the names in the Rolodexes of the media establishments and we will see a difference.”

Rosica came to understand that complaining about the mainstream media was no longer enough. Neither was obsequiously currying favor with the unschooled, or the downright hostile. If they wanted to be heard and understood, Catholics had to do two things: improve their outreach to the establishment media, and create a complementary media all their own.

A WIDE REACH

Today, not-for-profit Salt + Light works closely with the secular television networks and media outlets in Canada to provide trusted, accurate, positive background material about Catholic matters. The station's award-winning documentary division produces original films about the lives of the saints and the Holy Land.

Its other original programming focuses on stories of social justice and shows about prayer, devotions, and the liturgy (including a televised daily Mass and ceremonies from the Vatican, such as canonizations).

Through cable and satellite, Salt + Light now reaches 2.5 million Canadian homes, 24 hours a day. Reflecting Canada's official government policy of multiculturalism, the population mix of its big cities, and Rosica's own multi-lingual fluency, Salt + Light produces more than a dozen different series in English, French, Italian, and Cantonese.

"The Chinese Catholic young people who had worked with me on World Youth Day have produced nearly 100 episodes of a magazine-type show for all of the Canadian Chinese Catholics in this country, and those shows are being used in Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Mainland China," says Rosica.

Salt + Light's reach even extends beyond Canada's borders. America's Sirius Radio carries their weekly radio program, while the channel's blog gets more than 60,000 visits a month.

In order to evangelize effectively, Rosica explains, "we need to go to the 'new areopagi' of our day, which are all of those places where people are gathering."

In 2009, in recognition of his success, Pope Benedict XVI appointed Rosica a consultant to the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications. The Basilian was humbled by the honor, particularly because "people constantly ask me where I did my media training and film studies. I smile and tell them that I don't even watch TV and I see few movies!"

His appointment to the prestigious post, he says, "is a tribute to the Church in Canada, as it is for all the young people who work with me at the first Catholic television channel of Canada, and to our benefactors, who have made this project of new evangelization possible."

That said, Rosica's career has not been without its share of controversies. In 2009 he attracted considerable ire for his remarks on the subject of Senator Edward Kennedy's funeral Mass, which was attended by Boston's Cardinal Sean O'Malley, despite the late senator's notoriously scandalous life and his pro-abortion voting record.

"As a Roman Catholic priest who is pro-life, I was proud of my Church last week," Rosica wrote in a blog post several days after the Kennedy funeral. "[I was] grateful for the courageous and gracious actions of American Church leaders in Boston and Washington, who opened the doors of their Church to reveal a Gospel of mercy and hospitality, in the midst of sinfulness and ambiguity of public leaders who are in need of conversion, forgiveness and prayers, like the rest of us."

Rosica's lengthy online meditation on the event also criticized certain Catholic writers and websites, whom he felt had responded uncharitably to the senator's death. "Well-known colleagues in Catholic television broadcasting and media in North America have revealed themselves to be not agents of life, but of division, destruction, hatred, vitriol, judgment and violence," Rosica charged. The subsequent thrust and parry of responses and counteractions reportedly included death threats received at Rosica's office.

Rosica credits his success with Salt + Light Television to "the privilege of having a master and mentor who knew the power of words and images, and who taught me everything I know about television, media, and evangelization. It was a character study of nearly 27 years, a master class that I never sought out and certainly never deserved. I learned most of what I am doing at Salt + Light Television from Pope John Paul II."

Pope John Paul II's promotion of and confidence in "the New Evangelization," and his embrace of modern media as a positive tool for good (and not just a potential instrument of temptation) has profoundly inspired Rosica over the past eight years. Serving as the CEO of a television channel wasn't something he could have imagined while he was studying Aramaic verbs at the Ecole Biblique et Archéologique Française in Jerusalem.

"I would never have dreamed it up in my wildest imagination," Rosica admits. "I believe that through Salt + Light Television, we are reaching out to a new generation of young people. Our viewers and followers increase by the week.

"As I look back, I see that none of our efforts were in vain and nothing from WYD 2002 was lost."

Except for that one troublesome raincoat.

Kathy Shaidle is co-author of *The Tyranny of Nice: How Canada Crushes Freedom in the Name of Human Rights (and What It Means for Americans)*. A version of this article appears in the March 2011 issue of CWR.