

# JOSEPH ZWILLING

Director of Communications Office, Archdiocese of New York

■ BY LUCY GORDAN

**J**oseph Zwilling was born in Levittown on Long Island, a member of St. Bernard's parish, where he was baptized and confirmed. He went to St. Bernard's Elementary School there before spending three years of high school at St. Albert's Junior Seminary, a boarding school in Middletown, New York, run by the Carmelites. At age 17 he decided that the priesthood was not his vocation, so, after finishing up at a Catholic high school back at home, he earned a degree in communications from Syracuse University, intending to go into broadcasting or television/radio production. He and Culture Editor Lucy Gordan met in his office at the Cardinal Cooke Catholic Center at 1011 First Avenue on the corner of 55th Street in Manhattan.

## How did you come to work in the communications office of the archdiocese of New York?

JOSEPH ZWILLING: After university I worked about a year at WGBH, a public television station in Boston, but let's back up a little bit. As a junior in high school, I met a priest of the archdiocese of New York, Father Peter Madori, who sparked my interest in communications. He had a radio program on a pop/rock music station here in New York and invited me to be a guest host. The thrust of Madori's show was analyzing the pop/rock of the day from a Catholic perspective. I worked with him throughout college.

Now jump forward. While at WGBH, Father Madori called me. He worked in the communications office here and suggested I apply for the recently-vacated job of assistant director of media relations. So I interviewed with then-Father Edwin O'Brien, who until recently was the archbishop of Baltimore and now has been named Pro-Grand Master of the Equestrian Order of the Holy Sepulcher of Jerusalem. At the time O'Brien was director of communications here. I got the job and began May 2, 1982. I expected to stay for about a year and then go back to



Zwilling in front of Michelangelo's *Pietà* in St. Peter's in Rome, June 2011. Below: the cast and crew of the *Today Show* with Archbishop Dolan in St. Peter's Square. Zwilling is behind His Excellency to the right. Monsignor Paul Tighe is behind to his left



broadcasting, but it hasn't turned out that way.

## When did you become the director of communications?

ZWILLING: On my 31st birthday, February 21, 1990. I think Cardinal O'Connor telephoned me to confirm my appointment, knowing it was my birthday.

## What is a typical day like?

ZWILLING: Under Archbishop Dolan, I'm wearing two hats. I'm director of communications and also the program director for our Catholic channel on Sirius-XM satellite radio. I spend half my day here at the Catholic Center, doing media planning, talking to reporters, outreaching to Hispanic Catholics, and the other half across town at the headquarters of Sirius-XM satellite radio where we have a 24-hour a day, 7-days a week Catholic channel that's overseen by the Archdiocese of New York even though it's a national channel, heard all over the United States and Canada. I'm responsible

for the hosts, programming, budget, and for making sure that the channel puts on good, solid, Catholic programs.

## What do you mean by good, solid, Catholic programs?

ZWILLING: Our channel has primarily a talk-format so it's interactive. We invite call-ins from listeners and engage them. Together we talk about what's going on in everyday life, in the life of the Church, of the country, all from a Catholic perspective. One of our hosts, actually a married couple with six children, talks about raising

good, healthy, Catholic children in a society that often doesn't support that choice. Another program is hosted by a now 40-year-old layman and a Catholic priest. They too talk about their experiences trying to live out the faith in a world that challenges their beliefs. We want to talk about the challenges our listeners face and to ground that in the teachings of the Church. Of course, we have traditional programs like daily Mass, on the Scriptures, prayer meetings, but we've tried deliberately to create a



## PROFILE JOSEPH ZWILLING

new kind of Catholic radio, one that's upbeat and uses a very modern format which engages people. We see our mission as evangelization, as reaching out to people who identify themselves as Catholics, to people who say: "Yes, I'm Catholic, but I only attend Mass on Christmas and Easter." We want to draw these people back into a more regular practice of their faith, to show them how their faith can play a significant role in their daily lives. We don't sound like any other Catholic or religious radio. We've deliberately tried to forge this new kind of path.

### How could I listen to your channel?

ZWILLING: You'd need a subscription to Sirius-XM. I think it costs \$12 a month. It's like cable TV, but for radio. Sirius-XM has over 150 channels for all kinds of music, talk, and sports shows so as to appeal to a broad audience.

### How has your job changed over the years?

ZWILLING: Technology has changed the pace of communications drastically. When Cardinal Cooke used to go to Rome, I had to sit here at an old-fashioned teletype machine, type out messages, and run them through the teletype machine. The next morning usually there'd be an answer from Rome printed out on teletype paper. Now, when I'm over in Rome with Archbishop Dolan, I've got my BlackBerry and my cell phone and I'm in instant communication with the office here.

### How many people work with you?

ZWILLING: Here I have an assistant director for Hispanic media; an assistant director for new media, our website, Facebook and Twitter; an assistant director for media relations; and a receptionist/bookkeeper. Our Catholic channel employs about 15 people.

### You've worked with several archbishops and cardinals of New York. Can you tell our readers a personal memory about each one?

ZWILLING: Sure. I can't pretend that I knew Cardinal Cooke well. I simply didn't see him as often as Cardinal O'Connor, Cardinal Egan, and now Archbishop Dolan, but in 1983 a big controversy erupted over the St. Patrick's Day parade. The parade's grand marshal that year was an IRA supporter and Cardinal Cooke had worked diligently throughout his years as archbishop of New York to find a peaceful solution to Ireland's problems. So many Catholic organizations chose not to march and many people thought that Cardinal Cooke wouldn't review the parade. This was really my baptism by fire. I was the chief spokesperson for the dioceses throughout the controversy. On St. Patrick's Day Cardinal Cooke met privately with the Grand Marshall before Mass; they agreed that the Cardinal wouldn't review the parade until the Grand Marshall had passed the cathedral. Later, as he was going out the bronze doors of St. Patrick's surrounded by all his auxiliary bishops and hordes of press pushing for his comments, the cardinal stopped and came over to me, tucked away in the corner as is my custom, and said, "Joe, I just want to

apologize for all the trouble I've caused you these last few weeks." I found out a few months later, when we announced that he was dying, what a typical gesture that had been from Cardinal Cooke, that he always made it a point in his very quiet way to thank people, that he would go to fundraising dinners at the Waldorf-Astoria, but always stopped in the kitchen afterwards to thank the cooks and waiters. He was such a gentle, kind man!

As I've said, I'd planned to stay a year, but when Archbishop O'Connor became cardinal, life was way too exciting here for me to resign. Cardinal O'Connor was without question the most brilliant and hardest-working man I've ever met. I learned so much from him in the 16 years I was privileged to work with him. Nothing got past him; you couldn't top him. Like Cardinal Cooke he made it a point to be present for people. The one story that sticks out for me, and I could tell you hundreds of others, is my wedding day in 1993. I'd invited him to my wedding and got a beautiful note back saying, "Thank you very much for the invitation; I will certainly say Mass for you on the morning of your wedding." So my wife and I interpreted this to mean that he wasn't coming. Jump forward several weeks.

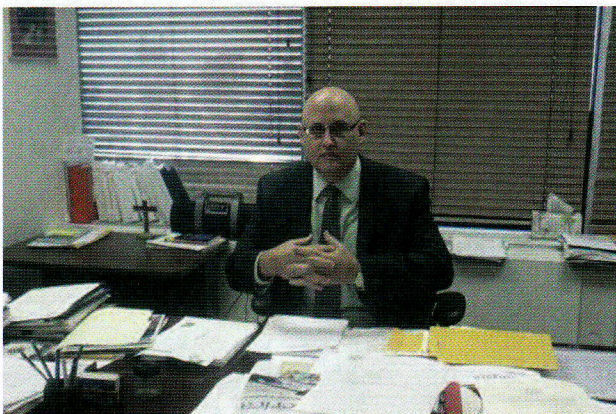
I'm in the limo riding to the church. I don't see the cardinal at first; instead I see his secretary's (Monsignor Gregory Mustaciulo's) big head of black hair, so I realize instantly that Cardinal O'Connor has shown up. It struck me afterwards that he'd never told anyone he was coming because, if he'd done so, everything would have been about "the cardinal's coming, oh my goodness, the cardinal's coming," and Kathy's and my wedding would have taken a back seat. He didn't want to upstage our wedding day.

Cardinal Egan may be the most considerate man I've ever met. He's a most gracious host. He taught me the meaning of hospitality. For my 25th anniversary working here he hosted a celebration dinner for my family and

friends in his residence. It was one of the most wonderful evenings of my life.

When I accompanied Egan and Monsignor Mustaciulo to Rome for Pope John Paul II's funeral and then the conclave, any time there was a ceremony at the Vatican, Cardinal Egan gave me his bag to carry, something he never did in the States, where he always carried his own bag. It only occurred to me later that this was his way of getting me into events in the Vatican that the Swiss Guards would have barred me from attending.

I knew Archbishop Dolan before he became archbishop of New York. He was a NAC classmate of my wife's brother, who now serves as *nuncio* in New Zealand and the Pacific Islands, and they've remained friends. The first thing that impressed me about Dolan was that, any time I saw him just in passing, he'd always ask after my brother-in-law Charles. A special memory: when my family and I went over to Rome when Egan received his *pallium*, he arranged for my daughter Mary and his grammar school teacher Sister Mary



Joseph Zwillling in his office during the interview (Lucy Gordan photo)

**"I think the Church in the United States right now is blessed with many dynamic bishops, especially those appointed by Pope Benedict XVI"**



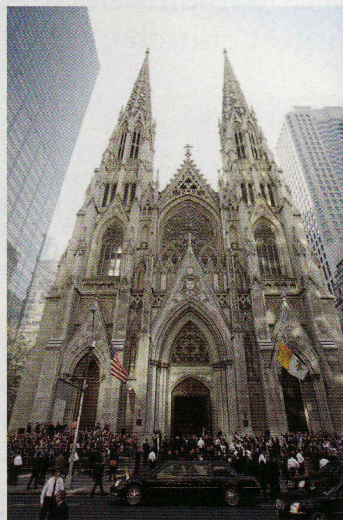
Bosco to be presented to the Holy Father at the next day's audience.

**Besides Archbishop Dolan, who do you consider the leading American bishops today?**

ZWILLING: You think I'm going to touch that question? The one thing I've learned working here is not to single anyone out because you'll always overlook someone by mistake. I think the Church in the United States right now is blessed with many dynamic bishops, especially those appointed by Pope Benedict XVI. They form a new generation of media-charismatic leadership. They understand the need to communicate effectively. For someone who's devoted the last 30 years to the Church's communication ministry, I find this exhilarating. It will help in the new evangelization efforts and bring people back to the fullness of the faith. In the States we're not yet at the dire statistics of Europe with only 15% of the Catholic population attending Mass on any given Sunday; in New York we're at between 35 and 40%, but there's big room for improvement. A study was recently published about people who identify themselves as "ex-Catholics." This is a major shift. Previously people would identify themselves as Catholic even if they weren't practicing. What we're trying to do on the Catholic channel

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Pope Benedict XVI arrives for Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York, April 19, 2008 (CNS photo)



is to inspire people to return to the Church.

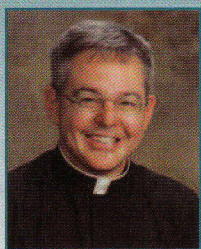
**What do you like best and least about your job?**

ZWILLING: Two special things come to mind right off the bat. I like working here because every day there's a new challenge. I've been given experiences and opportunities here that I can't imagine in another job. I've met several presidents of the United States and two popes on more than one occasion; I've traveled with the cardinal/ archbishops of New York and not just to Rome. Just experiencing the life of the Church with them has been tremendous. I believe that my job has been a ministry. Although years ago I did not feel my vocation to the priesthood, I still desired to be close to the Church. Being able to serve the Church, the New York archdiocese, its archbishops has been a blessing for me. I'm glad that's it's turned out to be a life-long commitment.

I certainly look forward to another 15 or 20 years here. When Archbishop Dolan retires, maybe it will be time for me to retire too. The only downside, and I'm channeling my wife's complaints, is that this job is 24/7 and my Blackberry keeps me tethered to the office even when I'm on vacation. ○

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On July 1, 2011, the Society's Center for the Advancement of Catholic Higher Education relocated to the Mount under the leadership of Monsignor Stuart Swetland, Mount St. Mary's Vice President for Catholic Identity and Mission and the Center's new Executive Director.

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