



Tierney's Role in Philly Purchase Revives 'Cipriano' Controversy

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By: E&P Staff

When the new owners of two major Philadelphia dailies held a press conference to announce their big purchase on Tuesday, one attendee had a particularly intense connection with Brian Tierney, the leader of the local group of businessmen/investors.

This was Ralph Cipriano, a former reporter at one of the papers, The Philadelphia Inquirer, who lost his job there several years ago, then sued the newspaper and won millions of dollars, in an incident allegedly related to Tierney's publicity work back then on behalf of the local Catholic archdiocese. But according to a Philadelphia Inquirer story today, Tierney shook Cipriano's hand on Tuesday.

At the press conference, in any case, Cipriano referred to Tierney as "an advocate kicking down editors' doors" in the past, and told The New York Times, "I don't think he showed much respect for the integrity of the newsroom."

Indeed, Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua told E&P in 2001 that Tierney had "stopped" a particular Cipriano story from appearing in the Inquirer in the mid-1990s.

Tierney, a major Republican funder, said at the press conference, however, that he would never impose his political or other views on the two newspapers. He said he had asked his fellow investors to sign a pledge they would never intervene if their business interests received editorial scrutiny.

Many reporters and editors at the two papers reacted by expressing relief and offering an endorsement of the takeover and faith in Tierney. Others referred to the "Stockholm Syndrome" or said time-will-tell.

To provide a little background on why some discomfort about Tierney lingers, we present an abridged version of a feature story, written by then-staffer Joe Nicholson, that appeared in the Feb. 5, 2001, issue of E&P.

In it, some Inquirer editors and reporters testified that the Inquirer was not unduly intimidated by Tierney. But former Enterprise Editor Jonathan Neumann said then that Tierney's firm had developed a "routine" of contending that reporters were "biased or they have an agenda" whenever they began asking questions about one of Tierney's clients and "suggesting that either those reporters be taken off the stories or the newspaper take a look at whether they should be doing the story. ... I found it very offensive that he would basically use character assassination of reporters as a method to influence the newspaper."

by Joe Nicholson

Feb. 5, 2001

Three high-ranking Philadelphia Inquirer editors and a reporter sat at a wooden conference table across from three of Cardinal Anthony Bevilacqua's top advisers. It was near the end of 1996, one of several occasions when Inquirer editors went to the Archdiocese of Philadelphia's 13-story North 17th Street headquarters for private scoldings.

Brian Tierney, then 39, owner of the leading public-relations and advertising firm in Philadelphia — and the cardinal's confidante and point man — held the floor, railing angrily at the notably silent editors. He declared that the 42-year-old reporter sitting across from him, Ralph Cipriano, was biased and contended the newspaper's coverage of the archdiocese and its cardinal was unfair.

During one stretch of several months in late 1996 and early 1997, Tierney berated Inquirer editors, including Robert J. Rosenthal, now the paper's editor and executive vice president, at three meetings at the archdiocese headquarters, according to court documents recently obtained by E&P and accounts of participants who were interviewed.

At a time when churches and schools in poor neighborhoods were being closed by Bevilacqua, Tierney was alarmed by Cipriano's efforts to report that the 73-year-old priest was spending several hundred thousand dollars to renovate his 30-room mansion and \$500,200 to fix up an oceanfront house in Ventnor, N.J., where he spends summer vacations.

Archdiocese officials had refused to reply to Cipriano's questions, and Tierney told the editors to come see him if they wanted some answers. Tierney demanded the right to select which reporters would cover the archdiocese, one editor recalls, and warned that Bevilacqua, spiritual leader of 1.45 million Roman Catholics, was prepared to launch a public campaign against the circulation-challenged Inquirer.

Robert J. Hall, the Inquirer publisher and chairman, today denies that Tierney bullied his paper away from a full rendering of the Cipriano story.

But in an interview last week with E&P, Bevilacqua praised Tierney as "a great help to us" and, recalling the

three meetings with the Inquirer in 1996 and 1997, declared flatly: “He stopped the story. That was the important thing.”

The cardinal added that ever since Tierney dealt with the editors, “The Inquirer has been very positive in their stories, much more than they have ever been.”

Brian Tierney told E&P, “I don’t think religions and other nonprofits should necessarily be covered the way the federal government is covered.”

The blunder

Much of what happened in the aftermath of those meetings in 1996 and 1997 has become well-known. Reporter Cipriano contended his editors refused to publish substantial parts of the information that his months-long investigation turned up. Cipriano wrote a lengthy story for the National Catholic Reporter, an independent weekly based in Kansas City, Mo., that included some spiked material, such as the amount of money spent by Bevilacqua on his mansion and summer house.

When Washington Post reporter Howard Kurtz asked Rosenthal about Cipriano, the popular and deeply respected newsroom leader blurted out, “There were things we didn’t publish that Ralph wrote that we didn’t think were truthful. He could never prove them.” Cipriano then sued Rosenthal, the Inquirer, and parent Knight Ridder for libel and slander — and later was fired.

Last month, the Inquirer announced the suit had been settled for an undisclosed sum, reportedly well over a million dollars, and issued a statement that quoted Rosenthal saying, “I regret having made my comments to the Post. They were intemperate, and I apologize for them.”

After the settlement, E&P obtained case documents, including portions of closed-door testimony in depositions by Rosenthal, Cipriano, and Phillip Dixon, now the deputy managing editor, that have never been made public.

In his testimony, for example, Cipriano called his editors “spineless gentlemen” and claimed they were intimidated by Tierney. Dixon, in his deposition, explained, on the other hand, that he had “instructed Mr. Cipriano not to submit any more stories about the Catholic Church because I concluded he had become biased and inappropriately obsessed about the Catholic Church in Philadelphia.”

1991: The Cipriano Saga Begins

In the fall of 1991, when Rosenthal was the metropolitan editor, he assigned Cipriano, a former reporter with the Los Angeles Times and the Albany, N.Y., Times Union, to the religion beat. According to Cipriano’s suit, “Rosenthal told Cipriano that he was looking for an independent thinker who would take a different view of what had become a dull subject in the newspaper.”

Cipriano is known for his zeal and, some would say, the self-righteousness of a investigative reporter who takes the pursuit of truth, along whatever perilous path it may lead, as a mission.

When Cipriano learned Bevilacqua had approved construction of an expensive video-conferencing center, he pursued the story aggressively. PR exec Tierney “accused Ralph Cipriano of bias and prejudice toward the archdiocese and demanded that he be taken off the religion beat,” according to the complaint.

Bevilacqua’s advisers met with Inquirer editors. This came at a time when the newspaper was hemorrhaging readers. Some 39% of Inquirer readers are Roman Catholic, according to the paper’s most recent data.

During a meeting at the Inquirer, Cipriano walked in and found that archdiocese officials had copies of his stories marked in different colors to indicate which portions they considered objectionable, according to the complaint.

When Cipriano’s profile ran on Feb. 7, 1993, it described budget deficits and the new Multimedia Conference Center, along with references to Bevilacqua having “revitalized the role of archbishop.” It appeared under a large photograph (which dominated the front page) of the cardinal kissing an elderly woman who was in a hospital bed. “This was done to soften any perceived criticism contained in the article,” argued Cipriano’s complaint. After the profile ran, Cipriano was replaced on the religion beat by veteran reporter Bill Macklin.

But Macklin, too, immediately ran into the same deep suspicion and hostility at the archdiocese.

Archdiocese officials were “constantly critical” and maintained an attitude of “We don’t approve of what you are doing. We don’t like it,” recalls Macklin. Asked if he received threats from the archdiocese, Macklin replies, “Well, again, so what? Who cares? ... There was no effect on my reporting whatsoever,” he says, although it “affected my attitude toward the beat.”

Philadelphia fiefdom?

Like some other Inquirer reporters with a knack for it, Cipriano (after leaving the religion beat) occasionally wrote articles on various subjects for the paper’s Sunday magazine. In 1996, the magazine editor asked him to write a profile of Bevilacqua. Cipriano went to work, and it wasn’t long before he learned about Bevilacqua’s plans to renovate his mansion and the summer house, which is also used by retired priests. He also obtained documents describing an \$87,500 settlement with a former employee of the cardinal who claimed, among other things, that he had been subjected to “rude and abusive treatment” by Bevilacqua.

After Inquirer editors discussed Cipriano’s scoop, supervision of his reporting was transferred from the magazine editor to Enterprise Editor Jonathan Neumann, an experienced hand with hard news and investigative pieces.

Of course, Cipriano’s efforts set off alarm bells at archdiocese headquarters, and that led to three meetings with Inquirer editors in late 1996 and early 1997 that were dominated by Tierney, the cardinal’s PR alter ego.

Tierney is a major player in Philadelphia. His firm, Tierney Communications, has four divisions that handle advertising, public relations, digital, and direct mail. The ad division claims annual billings of \$230 million and handles clients that include Verizon and the Pennsylvania Lottery; it places a substantial amount of advertising in the Inquirer. Tierney's publicity clients include McDonald's and IBM. The "2000 O'Dwyer's Directory of PR Firms" declares that the phrase "It can be done" sums up Tierney's "client service culture."

Last year, Tierney served in the presidential race as national head of Catholics for Bush, and Tierney Digital designed and deployed the official Web site for the Republican National Convention in Philadelphia. He once worked for the Republican National Committee and was a Reagan appointee to the Small Business Administration. Given these contacts and advertising influence, when Tierney talks, it's no wonder Inquirer executives listen.

In the course of Cipriano's dealings with the archdiocese, according to the reporter's complaint, Tierney warned him, "We got rid of you once, and we'll do it again." The complaint also contends that Tierney told Cipriano and his editors that he would "ruin" Cipriano and the Inquirer.

One of the editors who was scolded by Tierney, Phillip Dixon, currently deputy managing editor, says the PR/ad executive never gained control of reporter assignments, but adds, "I don't care to talk about Brian Tierney." He acknowledges that he has described Tierney's behavior during the meetings as "venomous."

Tierney "usually takes the floor and speaks for as long as he can. It could be twenty minutes," says Neumann. "It's not like [Tierney] sits there and has a discussion with you. It's like he sits there and lectures you. There is not much room to respond. ... [Tierney] is very insulting, he's very demeaning, very harsh in this language in criticizing individual reporters."

Enterprise Editor Jonathan Neumann, who recently left the Inquirer to write a novel, says Tierney's firm had developed a "routine" of contending reporters were "biased or they have an agenda" whenever a reporter began asking questions about one of Tierney's clients and "suggesting that either those reporters be taken off the stories or the newspaper take a look at whether they should be doing the story. ... I found it very offensive that he would basically use character assassination of reporters as a method to influence the newspaper."

Tierney views it differently, of course. Confronting the Inquirer editors made "you feel like you were going into combat," says Tierney, who recalls the editors "would just sit there stone-faced" while he denounced them. If the editors viewed his presentation as a threat, contends Tierney, that belief shows "a hypersensitivity to the fact that if you're aggressive in terms of pointing out to them inaccuracies or going to them and trying to make a factual case, you know, you're, like, a bully."

Editors with that view, says Tierney, leave him "thinking, like, you guys are worth about a gazillion billion dollars. You print your paper. You've got truckloads of paper coming up. How the hell could I be a bully to you?"

Another Bevilacqua aide who attended the meetings, Communications Director Susan Gibbs, declines to say whether she feels the Inquirer editors got bullied. Like Tierney, Gibbs — now the communications director for the Archdiocese of Washington — was interviewed by E&P in 1998.

Bevilacqua says he recalls that Tierney administered three scoldings to the Inquirer editors, and adds, “I don’t know what he said and all. Strangely, I don’t. But he represented us.”

Asked about the cardinal’s statement to E&P last week that Tierney had “stopped” Cipriano’s original reporting, at least in one case, Editor Rosenthal declines all comment on the archdiocese, citing legal factors surrounding the Cipriano court case. (Rosenthal has long earned praise from the Inquirer’s legendary editor, Eugene Roberts.) Publisher Hall says, “I know of no story stopped by Brian [Tierney], and I’d be surprised if it ever occurred. Certainly Brian has talked to editors and has talked to me at different times about stories. ... Now the other part could be that Brian or someone else called us and had more information about a story that changed the premise of that story. That could possibly stop the story.”

Getting personal

Cipriano’s story about the archdiocese appeared April 14, 1997. It was far briefer than the reporter once imagined, although it revealed the \$500,000 outlay for the new high-tech media center. Perhaps Cipriano’s editors felt they had stood up to the archdiocese by keeping him on the assignment and publishing a story. But Cipriano did not see it that way — his court complaint describes the result of his months of investigation as “neutered,” with most information considered objectionable by the archdiocese allegedly “deleted.”

His story lacked any reference to the documents that describe the \$87,500 settlement and various allegations about the cardinal’s personal life, including his supposed “rude and abusive treatment” of an employee.

In Rosenthal’s deposition, he testifies that, in his comments to Kurtz (which ultimately would cost the paper well over a million dollars, according to published reports), he was not referring to Cipriano’s printed stories, which he calls accurate and truthful, but to unpublished allegations. “I remembered things [Cipriano] said about the cardinal’s personal life, which we had never, to my knowledge, substantiated,” Rosenthal says in the deposition. “And to me, it showed the depths of how much he was going to go after the cardinal.”

Rosenthal tells E&P, however, that he continues to place a high priority on investigative reporting — and the paper’s enterprise efforts do, in fact, win local and national awards every year.

‘The Voice of the Shepherd’

In any case, Bevilacqua launched a two-pronged assault on Cipriano and the Inquirer. Writing in “The Voice of Your Shepherd,” a bulletin mailed to all of the archdiocese’s Catholics, Bevilacqua claimed the Inquirer had run “fallacious” reporting and said that “a current example of its unfair and inaccurate reporting is found in an article by Ralph Cipriano published ... under the headline, ‘Archdiocese’s Center Gets Little Use.’”

Bevilacqua also contended, “Given the history of the reporter’s attitude and posture toward the archdiocese, it is difficult to rule out intentional bias.” He concluded that it was “even more disturbing” that the newspaper’s management allowed Cipriano to proceed with his reporting after “several meetings involving the Inquirer’s senior management personnel and archdiocese representatives at which our concerns about bias on the part of the reporter” were raised. “As your archbishop, I assure you that I will not remain silent allowing any reporter or news organization to unjustly malign the Catholic Church,” Bevilacqua declared.

As the second prong of Bevilacqua’s attack, his archdiocese secretary for external affairs asked the Inquirer to publish, in its entirety, a letter calling Cipriano’s article “a disingenuous and erroneous attack” that “contained numerous inaccuracies and distortions” and “violated journalistic ethics.”

The archdiocese’s request that its letter be published in its entirety caused uncertainty at the Inquirer. For one thing, the paper declares that it reserves the right to edit all letters. In an effort to determine how the paper would handle the matter, an internal memo was written by Neumann, the enterprise editor, to Maxwell E.P. King, who had not yet been succeeded as the top editor by Rosenthal.

Neumann reviewed the archdiocese’s criticisms of Cipriano and concluded they were “false and libelous.” He urged his editors to follow standard policy and refuse to publish parts of a letter that are false unless the letter is accompanied by a substantial editor’s note pointing out the inaccuracies in the letter. “What the archdiocese is trying to do is once again bully the Inquirer,” wrote Neumann. He warned against “caving in” to Bevilacqua and concluded, “By no means should we allow the archdiocese or anyone else to dictate to the newspaper what we will and will not publish. ... I hope we have the sense and courage to recognize that this letter is utterly irresponsible, and should be treated as such,” concluded Neumann.

When the archdiocese’s letter was published on May 19, 1997, the Inquirer acceded to the archdiocese’s demand that it be published in its entirety. But the newspaper also published a note of rebuttal from King in which the editor said Cipriano “has been objective and ethical in his reporting.” The headline over the editor’s note read, “From the editor: Article was fair and responsible.”

Indeed, Rosenthal, in the deposition obtained by E&P, cites “many, many stories” that Cipriano wrote about both church and non-church subjects as “fine examples of journalism” that he was “very proud” of.

Truth or dare?

While the archdiocese was unhappy about what Cipriano got into the paper, Cipriano was unhappy about what didn’t make it. The reporter approached the National Catholic Reporter and began additional reporting that ultimately produced a 9,000-word article, which was published on June 19, 1998.

In the days leading up to publication of the article, Cipriano and his editor, Rosenthal, each spoke off-the-cuff in separate interviews about the conflicts swirling around Bevilacqua — and each later regretted his comments.

In an interview with Philadelphia City Paper, an alternative weekly, Cipriano referred to Bevilacqua's attack on his integrity in the church bulletin, declaring "this guy has condemned me in every house in the archdiocese." The story, published on June 11, 1998, also quoted Cipriano as saying, "The Jesus I read about in the Bible is the opposite of what Cardinal Tony Bevilacqua is."

The Washington Post learned about the planned publication of the Cipriano article in the National Catholic Reporter and asked Rosenthal for comment. Rosenthal's intemperate quotes about Cipriano's alleged untruthfulness were published in the Post June 13, 1998.

Philadelphia readers of the National Catholic Reporter either despised or loved the Cipriano article, according to the weekly's editor, Tom Roberts. "Some hated it and said, 'You shouldn't have written this way about the archbishop,'" reports Roberts, referring to phone calls and letters. "And there was an awful lot of reaction [from those who said], 'It's about time this story was told.'"

Cipriano was fired two months later, with the paper citing a "breach of loyalty to The Philadelphia Inquirer." His long article in the National Catholic Reporter went on to win top prize for investigative reporting from the Catholic Press Association of North America.

Catherine L. Rossi, Bevilacqua's director of communications, calls the article "extremely unfair" and "mean-spirited." Although his later court settlement bars both sides from discussing the case, Cipriano's lawyer, James E. Beasley Sr., let him make one comment to E&P: "Everything I wrote was true. That's really the bottom line."

A change of tone

Inquirer staffers differ in their views of the Rosenthal-Cipriano dust-up. Some contend the editors defer to the archdiocese and other powerful institutions to go along with the desire of the paper's management to avoid lawsuits and boycotts. Critics of Cipriano tend to blame him for the paper's problems with the archdiocese.

In any case, calm prevails these days between the archdiocese and the Inquirer. "It's a new and improved relationship, if we can call it that. We've come a long way since the mid-'90s," says Rossi, who became the archdiocese director of communications in 1997. "I have not had to deal with investigative reporters since I've been here."

About the time of the three meetings with Tierney in 1996 and 1997, the Inquirer offered Bevilacqua a regular column. "That was very good of them," says Bevilacqua, who decided he didn't have time to do it. Recently, the Inquirer was outbid in a commercial competition to take on the printing of Bevilacqua's weekly newspaper.

One reason for the conflict between the two titans of Philadelphia, the Inquirer and the archdiocese, is the strikingly different concepts of the role of the reporter — and the difference between the church and public institutions. Many feel a newspaper's "watchdog" role does not apply across the board. Rossi, Bevilacqua's communications director, says reporters should understand "inherently, because of who we are, that we are

trying to serve the common good.”

But former Inquirer Editor Gene Roberts has a radically different view. “In the end,” he says, “with all due respect to religion, you have to cover the church with the same philosophy with which you cover everybody else. You can’t have one set of rules for the archdiocese and another set of rules for everybody else.

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