

Mother Mary Angelica of the Annunciation, P.C.P.A. is 83 years old

MOTHER ANGELICA Eternal Word Television Network Irondale, Ala.

Few people believed Mother Angelica could pull off her dream of creating a cable network that Catholics could watch and learn from. But that didn't stop the determined nun, even though she knew next to nothing about the television business. With only \$200 at her disposal, Mother Angelica built a TV studio in the garage of her monastery in Irondale, Ala., which led to the creation in 1981 of Eternal Word Television Network — the first cable channel dedicated solely to religious programming. Over the past 21 years EWTN has grown to 50 million television homes in the United States and another 30 million worldwide. EWTN has always been offered to the cable industry free of charge and has done so without any advertising revenue. One of the network's most popular programs, *Mother Angelica Live*, was the first national live religious call-in program format on cable television. EWTN has delivered live coverage of several religious events including several of Pope John Paul II's visits to the United States as well as International World Youth Days. Mother Angelica, now 83 and recovering from a stroke she suffered two years ago, also established the world's largest privately owned and operated short-wave radio station, a satellite-delivered AM and FM radio network, a printing operation that sends out thousands of publications each month and a website featuring live audio and video streaming of EWTN's programming.

Accomplishments:

- brought the Poor Clares to Alabama as their abbess (in 1962)
- built the Hanceville monastery (which opened in 1999), and helped turn this pocket of Alabama into a veritable Catholic theme park.
- Mother Angelica is best known as the founder of the Eternal World Television Network (EWTN) — with just under 300 employees, an annual budget of about \$29 million, and an audience of about 66 million households in 43 countries, the largest Catholic cable network in the nation.
- On August 15, EWTN celebrates its 23rd birthday — two decades of skyrocketing growth since Mother Angelica started it in 1981 with just \$200 as a single television station operating out of the garage of her previous monastery in Irondale, Alabama, a Birmingham suburb some 50 miles from Hanceville. Irondale is still the home of EWTN's headquarters, and although Mother Angelica retired as chairman of its board in 2000, she still makes the drive there twice a week to tape her popular *Mother Angelica Live* television show in front of a studio audience
- While praying the Holy Rosary in her office with a recent visitor, she experienced an unusual healing. The visitor asked her to remove the braces from her legs and to try to walk without her crutches. Mother later explained that a heat came over her ankles. "Every time I walked back and forth," she said, "my legs started coming in straight." She was able to walk without her crutches for the first time in over forty years. So too her spinal injury seems to have been fully healed; she no longer needs her back brace. And her asthma? That seems to be gone too, she remarked.

[<<Back](#)

An Unlikely Media Mogul

It all began with one person - a nun named Mother Angelica.

"Mother Angelica was always fond of saying, it was a sign of God's humor, that EWTN - and a Catholic network of all things - would end up in Alabama," says Michael Warsaw, President of Eternal Word Television Network, the network founded by Mother Angelica.

The story started many years ago, when this nun injured her back.

She made a promise to God that if he would heal her, she'd build a monastery in the South.

He kept his part of the deal.

So in 1962, she moved to Irondale, Alabama and founded Our Lady of the Angels monastery.

The cloistered nuns lived a life of prayer there.

Then, in 1981, Mother Angelica felt a greater calling.

She wanted to build a television studio.

"So, with \$200 in the bank and no knowledge whatsoever of TV, she really stepped forward in faith, trusted in God and started EWTN," Warsaw says.

Construction crews were building a garage for the monastery, and quickly turned it into a studio.

And on August 15th, Eternal Word Television Network went on the air with just 12 employees.

Critics wondered, what could these cloistered nuns possibly know about television?

Apparently, they knew a lot.

From 12 employees to 268 today, EWTN is now a media giant.

In fact, it's the largest religious media network in the world.

As the television network grew, Mother Angelica set her sights on other avenues of communication.

In 1992, she launched the world's largest privately-owned short wave radio station.

And the EWTN web site gets about 1.5 million visitors a day.

The most amazing part?

It's all controlled from its base in Irondale, Alabama.

Employees says it's evident that this network is the work of God.

"He took this nun, a cloistered nun at that, and had her start the largest Catholic media network in the world," says Doug Keck, Vice-President, Programming and Production. "And not only did a nun do it on donations, but did it in the Bible belt."

In 1999, a new monastery was built in Hanceville, Alabama, and Mother Angelica and the Poor Clare nuns left Irondale for their new home.

That offered more room for the bustling network.

Monastery cells were converted into offices.

In fact, the office that belongs to Lisa Gould, Vice-President of Viewer Services, was once Mother Angelica's bedroom.

Employees at some companies get coffee breaks. Employees here, get prayer breaks. Each afternoon at 3, they can enter the chapel to pray.

Four live prime time shows are broadcast worldwide from the studios here.

And visitors come from all over the world, to tour the network and attend those live tapings.

"Mother Angelica has done what very few have, and even more have failed," says Father Mitch Pacwa, host of EWTN Live.

And if it's true that faith can move mountains, you have to believe, it can also build television networks.

For more information on EWTN, log onto www.ewtn.com.



Send questions or comments about this web site to whntfeedback@whnt.com
All content © Copyright 2001 - 2004 WorldNow and WHNT. All Rights Reserved.
For more information on this site, please read our [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#).



July-August 2001

[free e-letter](#)[subscribe](#)[events](#)[customer service](#)[about us](#)

Send this article to a friend

Columns:
Sed Contra
Deal Hudson

Late Edition
Michael M. Uhlmann

These Parables
George W. Rutler

Sense & Nonsense
James V. Schall

End Notes
Ralph McInerny

Seeing Things
Robert Royal
Books, Arts & Culture:**Books****Films****Music****More****Letters****Archives:****Past Issues****Past E-letters****► Cover Story****Mother Angelica's Empire of the Airwaves**

By Kathryn Jean Lopez

Hanceville, Alabama, is in the heart of the Bible Belt, in a state with a population that is less than 3 percent Catholic. Turn onto Old Country Road in this northern Alabama town and you'll likely see more than a few Southern Baptist churches as you drive along. But soon the religious landscape changes: For a mile or so, just about every house displays statue of the Virgin Mary in the front yard. Or a sign indicating that the dwelling is named after a saint and is a guest house for visiting pilgrims. Or a "For Sale" placard naming an astronomical price for the privilege of residing in an area that lives and breathes Catholicism.

Finally, you drive along a seemingly endless white picket fence framing fertile, farmable land, and you see what looks incongruously like a 13th-century abbey, surmounted by a enormous Italian Romanesque church with a red-brick campanile. Its name: the Our Lac of the Angels Monastery, housing the Poor Clare Nuns of Perpetual Adoration, members of a 147-year-old order of cloistered Franciscan sisters in traditional black-and-white garb. The church has its own name: the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament, where the nuns spend their days in the presence of the Eucharist, displayed in an eight-foot monstrance.

You're in the land of Mother Mary Angelica of the Annunciation, P.C.P.A., the 78-year-old nun who brought the Poor Clares to Alabama as their abbess (in 1962), built the Hanceville monastery (it opened in 1999; see "Mother's Magnificent Temple" in the September 2000 issue of *Crisis*), and helped turn this pocket of Alabama into a veritable Catholic theme park. Mother Angelica is best known as the founder of the Eternal World Television Network (EWTN)—with just under 300 employees, an annual budget of about \$29 million, and an audience of about 66 million households in 43 countries, the largest Catholic cable network in the nation. (*Crisis* publisher and editor-in-chief Deal W. Hudson hosts radio and television programs for EWTN.)

On August 15, EWTN will celebrate its 20th birthday—two decades of skyrocketing growth since Mother Angelica started it in 1981 with just \$200 as a single television station operating out of the garage of her previous monastery in Irondale, Alabama, a Birmingham suburb some 50 miles from Hanceville. Irondale is still the home of EWTN's headquarters, and although Mother Angelica retired as chairman of its board last year, she still makes the drive there twice a week to tape her popular *Mother Angelica Live* television show in front of a studio audience.

Many Catholics idolize Mother Angelica as a media mogul of faith, an up-to-date version of the video-savvy Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen of the 1950s who did Sheen one better by building her own broadcasting empire. They refer to her reverently as "Mother," and some have moved to Hanceville just to be near her, as the front-yard statues around the monastery indicate. Perhaps just as many other Catholics can't stand her, finding her needlessly truculent and all too ready to pick quarrels with those who strike her as less than orthodox in their beliefs. Whatever the reactions, Mother Angelica may well be, as

Time magazine once described her, "the most influential Roman Catholic woman in America."

"We never thought it would be this big or this beautiful," says Mother Angelica, a small woman who, as a cloistered nun, sits for her interview with me behind a grating, as she does with all guests. She precedes our talk with an apology for being late (by only five minutes) because she has been teaching the other sisters a catechism class. She is reflecting on the 20th anniversary of EWTN—a "miracle," as she calls it—but also on the shrine itself, another miracle. "I think it is going to give people courage. They lack awe—the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. And they lack courage—they won't fight for anything. They have no guts. I think what they experience when they walk into the church is courage. That's why it was built."

That remark is pure Mother Angelica, for whom reality is a heady mix of divine intervention, practical problems, and obstacles to be overcome with a mix of grit, considerable leadership skills, and faith in God. Mother Angelica's own life, as she tells me, has been a series of miraculous healings (she has suffered from a number of painful ailments), heavenly visions (including a visit from St. Michael the Archangel, who told her where to plant her EWTN short-wave signal), direct communications from God, and direct confrontations with other Catholics whose devotion may not be so intense or so tradition-minded as hers. You either loathe Mother Angelica, or you believe in her all the way; there's hardly any middle ground.

No Business Plan, No Budget

The same goes for EWTN itself, a multimedia company that has no business plan, no growth strategy, and no financing apparatus beyond the hope that it will find \$2.4 million a month to cover its expenses. Now a radio ministry, a publishing company (turning out "mini-books" written by Mother Angelica herself), and an Internet player as well as a cable network, it's a company that is run on nothing more than prayers—literally.

Knock on the door of the small office in Irondale that houses the staff of the EWTN Web site (www.ewtn.com, widely respected as a major resource of Catholic documents and lore), at the wrong time, say, 3 p.m. on a weekday as I did, and you may not find anyone inside right away. That's because the majority of the staff is probably in the office's modest chapel praying the chaplet of divine mercy, St. Faustina's prayer recited at the traditional hour of Christ's death. Go at noon to the larger chapel in EWTN's nearby headquarters building, and you'll find a huge contingent of EWTN's employees at Mass (about 70 percent are Catholic), along with a daily contingent of pilgrims. Even at 7 a.m., when EWTN airs a live daily Mass, you'll see employees who have risen at dawn to attend. That is the real thing.

EWTN calls itself the "global Catholic network," but it doesn't really keep track of who is actually watching its programs among the more than 60 million households it reaches. There's no such thing as a Nielsen rating at EWTN. Mother Angelica recalls the vice president of another network asking her what EWTN's rating was. She responded that she didn't care. The vice president was indignant: "You don't care? That's our gospel!" To which Mother Angelica replied crisply, "That's your problem."

There's no such thing as a budget at EWTN either, and there never has been. Mother Angelica explains: "We never had a committee. We never had a parish to help us. We started with \$200, and we went from there."

Today, EWTN has a small accounting department to make sure the staff gets its paychecks (salaries are sometimes sacrifices for new employees but are generally about the industry standard), pay bills, and count donations, but the chief financing strategy is,

as with all things at EWTN, prayer. Seriously. Says A. Scott Hults, communications director (and a consultant for Crisis), "Throughout its 20 years, we have looked to the providence of God to provide for our needs, and He has. No more, and for the most part no less. If we need a piece of equipment and have the money, we buy it. If a piece of equipment breaks, and we can't fix it, if we have the money, we replace it. If we want to build something, we build it as we can pay for it. Sometimes it takes longer, but that's how we do it. We operate very close to break-even each month."

Mother Angelica's motto is: God will provide. She even brags that EWTN "has never made money." The main fund-raising method consists of her occasionally saying at the end of her show, "Don't forget to put us between your gas and electric bill. Bye now." That message also appears on EWTN's Internet home page, where visitors are invited to contribute via credit card. Although the network does have some wealthy donors who have written it large checks, it does not do mass mailings or formal solicitations like most nonprofits. To celebrate its 20th anniversary, EWTN will be hosting—instead of a black-tie gala for wealthy Catholics as potential contributors—a party only for staff and their families. Even the network's anniversary merchandise—shirts, mugs, and the like—are for sale to viewers and listeners but for gifts to cable operators to thank them for carrying EWTN.

The money comes in, Mother Angelica insists, because EWTN is "a work of God. He has planned it, provided for it, graced it." She adds: "I am always amazed that we have come this far, because when our dear Lord started this thing, I would have never believed this. I thought we'd just make some programs, really, because there were no Catholic programs much of anywhere. And so as it evolved, I was always surprised. It was not ever under my control. It was never a goal. I don't even know what I thought. I didn't have a thought. I just always try to listen to the Lord. A lot of things didn't make sense. But who am I to question?"

Miracles in Ohio

If you look at the history of EWTN, you might conclude that only divine providence could account for the way a nun who admits that she knew nothing about television, radio, publishing, or the Internet has managed to establish an international presence in all these media. Without, she claims, an ounce of forethought.

Born in 1923 in Canton, Ohio, Mother Angelica, then Rita Rizzo, had a troubled childhood. Her father abandoned her and her mother, Mae Rizzo, when she was an infant. Growing up poor in an era when divorce was still taboo, she was subjected to ridicule by her classmates and teachers. She still remembers the nuns who taught her in parochial school as the meanest people on earth. Mother and daughter weren't even regular Sunday Mass-goers, and young Rita had little formal education, working at her mother's dry-cleaning shop from an early age. She was not, suffice it to say, an ideal candidate for a religious vocation.

But at age 20, she was healed—miraculously, she says—of debilitating stomach pain after making a novena to St. Thérèse of Lisieux at the urging of a woman in her neighborhood believed to have the stigmata, the wounds of Christ. Rita Rizzo's life changed instantly. "Unquestionably, that was the day I found God and really began to pray in an entirely new way," she recalls. "It was the first time I really recognized God's active role in my life. I fell in love with God." She began to pray constantly at a nearby church, and she concluded that Jesus wanted her to become a nun.

Her mother was devastated when her only child and only friend went to Cleveland to enter a Poor Clare convent in August 1944. But her attitude changed. Mae Rizzo eventually joined the Poor Clares herself and was professed as Sister Mary David in 1961. She

joined her daughter's convent and was present at EWTN's formal dedication in 1981 (Mother Angelica still giggles mischievously when she remembers that her mother called her "quote mother" as a sign of respect). Sister Mary David died in 1982 at age 83, and her body rests in the crypt of the monastery in Hanceville, where all the Alabama Poor Clare including Mother Angelica herself, will be buried.

Mother Angelica ended up in Alabama because of another miracle, as she tells the story. In 1946, at age 23, she was paralyzed in an accident with a scrubbing machine while cleaning the floors of a Poor Clare convent in Canton, where she was then living. Lying in a hospital bed, she prayed to God and promised that if she ever walked again, she would build Him a monastery in the South. (The choice of region seemed purely arbitrary: "I have no idea why I said that," she says.) Soon she was walking, but not without the aid of crutches and a back brace. She would be dependent on both for the next half-century and also in constant pain. She jokes that she quickly learned to be more specific in her prayers. "I asked to walk," she jokes, "I didn't ask to walk comfortably."

Visions in Alabama

She now had a promise to keep but no money. With permission from their abbess, she and others in her convent established St. Peter's Fishing Lures, a mail-order business that generated cash for the move to the South. She wrote letters to southern bishops, asking they wanted her, and Bishop Thomas Toolen of what was then the Mobile-Birmingham diocese in Alabama wrote back first. In July 1961, she and a small group of nuns moved to Irondale, where she set up the first Poor Clare monastery in the state and became its abbess.

Mother Angelica's media life began in the 1970s when she started giving talks about Catholicism, and her listeners started requesting copies of her remarks. Her fellow nuns helped her write them down, print them, and mail them out. Those were the famous Mother Angelica mini-books. To this day, the collection is available free of charge from EWTN to anyone who asks (as are rosaries). Her television career began later in the decade when she taped a series of videos at a Birmingham station for televangelist Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network. When she learned in 1981 that the station intended to air a movie denying Christ's resurrection, she took her show elsewhere—to her monastery's garage.

Growth of the new network was fairly rapid. In the beginning, carrying only a few hours of programming a day, EWTN reached 60,000 homes. Over the past 20 years that number has swelled more than a thousandfold. With the exception of a few major U.S. cities—namely New York and Los Angeles, where competition to be part of a basic cable package is particularly cutthroat—EWTN is available just about everywhere in America during some, if not all, hours of the day to anyone with a television set and a cable subscription. In the North American continent, the only countries that don't get EWTN on television are Cuba, with its communist government, and Canada, whose regulatory structure discourages religious programming (EWTN fans in Canada are currently petitioning to get the station on the air).

In 1993, EWTN launched WEWN, a shortwave radio station, the world's largest privately owned facility of its kind. The money came from the late Piet Derksen, a Dutch leisure-industry billionaire who had never met Mother Angelica until he spotted her in a hotel lobby in Rome. Ask her how she came to start the shortwave operation, and she'll tell you it was the archangel Michael—literally. She saw him on a hilltop near Irondale, and he told her to build it there. So she did, even though experts told her it wasn't an ideal location.

In 1996, she launched her radio ministry, supplying free AM/FM feed to Catholic radio stations that now reach 234 million potential listeners across the United States (see "A

New Frequency of Faith" in the April 2001 Crisis). "That was a watershed year for us," says EWTN vice president for marketing Christopher Wegemer. That year EWTN also went global, with satellite feeds going out worldwide.

Latin America has been a key target, and EWTN now reaches an estimated 14 million Hispanic television viewers. Walk into the radio station in Irondale at the right time, and you might think that it is an exclusively Spanish-language operation (EWTN's Web site is also in Spanish as well as English). Via satellite and shortwave, EWTN and WEWN also reach into Europe, the Pacific, and parts of Africa. And as Catholic seminaries worldwide install satellite dishes, the number of people connected to EWTN grows. Says Wegemer "Mother Angelica says knock on every door that we can. That has been our marketing tool. And pray that the Lord will open the doors."

Running on Faith

The EWTN staff is a cadre of broadcast professionals, some of whom left successful careers in the secular world after feeling called to Irondale. They seem to toe the company line happily and naturally. Divine providence is boss in EWTN parlance. Company chairman Bill Steltemeier, whom Mother Angelica tapped early on after spotting him during a talk in 1978, says he can't look back. "The Lord did it. I don't know how He did it, but He did it."

Other religious groups, Catholic and non-Catholic, have tried to build a media empire like EWTN's. In fact, when EWTN started sending signals in 1981, it entered a field that already had several established religious cable networks. Of all of those, including the Christian Broadcasting Network, EWTN is the only one remaining in full-time operation.

What is the EWTN difference? The network's president, Michael Warsaw, says it's that "EWTN is doing God's will." The lesson of EWTN "isn't what we've done, it's how it was done," says Mother Angelica. "We didn't have a plan. We didn't have proof it was going to work. I know that is not the way a successful business would work. If you are going to sell neckties, you have to know that people want neckties. But you can't work for God that way because you don't know what He wants to sell. There is no guarantee of success. There is only a guarantee of pleasing God for doing His will."

Those who work for EWTN say they have seen it work miracles. Staff members report that relatives have returned to the Church after tuning in to *Mother Angelica Live* or *The Journey Home*, a call-in show hosted by Marcus Grodi, a convert who interviews other converts about their discovery of Catholicism. Letters, phone calls, and e-mails to EWTN radio, television, and Web staff tell similar stories. Some people have written to say they were on the verge of suicide when they saw an EWTN program that convinced them not to do it. Says Thom Price, director of programming for the shortwave operation, "If you turn on most radio stations today, truth is subjective. That's not the case with EWTN."

Crossing Swords

The ever-outspoken Mother Angelica has a sizable number of detractors, who regard her as the Rush Limbaugh of the Catholic airwaves. When she criticized a mimed Stations of the Cross featuring a woman playing Jesus and viewed by Pope John Paul II at World Youth Day in Denver in 1993, the *National Catholic Reporter* took her to task.

In 1997, she garnered the wrath of Roger Cardinal Mahony of Los Angeles, who had issued a pastoral letter on the Eucharist, "Gather Faithfully Together." Mother Angelica

read the letter, which described the consecration in the Mass as a representation of the Last Supper, and said she was "shocked"—on the air. She told her viewers that they could legitimately disobey Cardinal Mahony's letter because it displayed what she deemed an incomplete, and thus heretical, interpretation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. The cardinal, predictably, was not amused and demanded a retraction. She made a grudging apology on the air that Cardinal Mahony deemed unsatisfactory. He later attempted to have her reprimanded by the Vatican without success.

Not long after the Mahony contretemps, in January 1998, Mother Angelica threw away the crutches that she had used since her 1946 accident, after praying the rosary in her office with a woman from Italy. Her pain had vanished, and she stood up and walked unaided to appear on an EWTN program, *Life on the Rock*, aimed at younger Catholics. EWTN staffers literally danced for joy at the latest miracle. But an article in *Commonweal* magazine noted acerbically: "Mother's timing was nothing if not opportune. Surely, for those with eyes to see (especially in Rome and weaselly American chanceries), heaven was signaling its interests in the Poor Clare network executive's contretemps with Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles."

Mother Angelica also tangled briefly with Birmingham's current bishop, David E. Foley. In 1999, Bishop Foley decreed that all priests in his diocese were to face the congregation when saying Mass. That ended the custom at EWTN of having the priests who celebrate televised liturgies or said Mass in its chapels face away from the people in attendance—the norm before the Second Vatican Council but a rare practice nowadays. Critics had complained that EWTN was trying to make a political statement, using its priests' posture at Mass to cast aspersions on lax post-Vatican II rituals elsewhere. Mother Angelica promptly complied with Bishop Foley's order, however, and he presided over the consecration of the Blessed Sacrament shrine at her new monastery in Hanceville later that year.

Growing Pains

Right now, EWTN's biggest problem isn't criticism but space. It still has only one studio, where it produces the majority of its television programming, and backdrops change from hour to hour. And the network can't build enough new structures to keep up with its burgeoning operations. "In my 16 years here, there has always been some kind of construction going on," says Rev. Joseph Mary Wolfe, who came to EWTN in 1985 as an engineer. In 1993, he was ordained as the first priest in the Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word, a new order founded by Mother Angelica to further Catholic communications. The order has a friary on the EWTN grounds and also a seminary, accredited by the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico.

Mother Angelica built her monastery in Hanceville because her cloistered Poor Clares, who also lived until recently on the crowded EWTN campus, needed more solitude for contemplation. As is so often the case with Mother Angelica, divine intervention played a key role in the move. In 1995, she says, Jesus told her to "build Me a temple where you will live, and I will help those who help you." Four families who wanted to remain anonymous soon donated the money to pay for the land, the monastery, and the shrine. (The monastery and shrine remain financially independent from EWTN.) Some 32 nuns now reside at the monastery in Hanceville with Mother Angelica: "There is no dearth of vocations," she laughs. A few externs—nuns who live outside the monastery—add to the number and make up what Mother Angelica considers the perfect-size religious congregation.

One tries to be skeptical about EWTN but instead walks away in wonder. Raymond Arroyo, the network's news director, who wound up at EWTN after interviewing Mother Angelica for a 1996 article for *Crisis* ("Mother Angelica and the Pain of Providence"), says

"We get letters and e-mails from the Philippines, Malta, Puerto Rico, Africa, Lebanon, Britain, and Australia when we broadcast the Holy Father—now that is the universal Church in action. Mother's vision and technology have allowed us for the first time in history to reach the entire Church with the pope's teachings. We have five separate signals going out of here 24 hours a day—each programmed independently. Who would have thought a nun from Canton, Ohio, could do that? But she'll tell you it was the Holy Spirit. And after seeing it up close, I believe her."

As for Mother Angelica, she doesn't take herself—or the role she played in building, managing, and nurturing EWTN for the last 20 years—too seriously. After all, as she constantly points out, it was God, not she who did the work. She laughs again: "I think if you are ignorant enough, the Lord helps you out or you wind up in jail."

Kathryn Jean Lopez is an associate editor of National Review and deputy managing editor of National Review Online (www.nationalreview.com).

[Back to Contents](#)

[▶ home](#)

[▶ free e-letter](#)

[▶ subscribe](#)

[▶ events](#)

[▶ customer service](#)

[▶ about](#)

Copyright Crisis Magazine © 2001 Washington DC, USA

National Review Online.....print version

NR Comment

The Official Word

The Media Mogul You've Never Heard Of

Now, here's a feminist role model.

By Kathryn Jean Lopez, NRO Executive Editor
August 15, 2001 8:40 a.m.

Editor's note: This article appears in the July-August issue of the *Crisis* magazine.

Hanceville, Alabama, is in the heart of the Bible Belt, in a state with a population that is less than 3 percent Catholic. Turn onto Old Country Road in this northern Alabama town, and you'll likely see more than a few Southern Baptist churches as you drive along. But soon the religious landscape changes: For a mile or so, just about every house displays a statue of the Virgin Mary in the front yard. Or a sign indicating that the dwelling is named after a saint and is a guest house for visiting pilgrims. Or a "For Sale" placard naming an astronomical price for the privilege of residing in an area that lives and breathes Catholicism.

Finally, you drive along a seemingly endless white fence framing fertile, farmable land, and you see what looks incongruously like a 13th-century abbey, surmounted by an enormous Italian Romanesque church. Its name: the Our Lady of the Angels Monastery, housing the Poor Clare Nuns of Perpetual Adoration, members of a 147-year-old order of cloistered Franciscan sisters in traditional garb. The church has its own name: the Shrine of the Most Blessed Sacrament, where the nuns spend their days in the presence of the Eucharist, displayed in an eight-foot monstrance.

You're in the land of Mother Mary Angelica of the Annunciation, P.C.P.A., the 78-year-old nun who brought the Poor Clares to Alabama as their abbess (in 1962), built the Hanceville monastery (which opened in 1999), and helped turn this pocket of Alabama into a veritable Catholic theme park. Mother Angelica is best known as the founder of the Eternal World Television Network (EWTN) — with just under 300 employees, an annual budget of about \$29 million, and an audience of about 66 million households in 43 countries, the largest Catholic cable network in the nation.

On August 15, EWTN celebrates its 20th birthday — two decades of skyrocketing growth since Mother Angelica started it in 1981 with just \$200 as a single television station operating out of the garage of her previous monastery in Irondale, Alabama, a Birmingham suburb some 50 miles from Hanceville. Irondale is still the home of EWTN's headquarters, and although Mother Angelica retired as chairman of its board last year, she still makes the drive there twice a week to tape her popular *Mother Angelica Live* television show in front of a studio audience.

Many Catholics idolize Mother Angelica as a media mogul of faith, an up-to-date version of the video-savvy Archbishop Fulton J. Sheen of the 1950s who did Sheen one better by building her own broadcasting empire. They refer to her reverently as "Mother," and some have moved to Hanceville just to be near her, as the front-yard statues around the monastery indicate. Perhaps just as many other Catholics can't stand her, finding her needlessly truculent and all too ready to pick quarrels with those who strike her as less than orthodox in their beliefs. Whatever the reactions, Mother Angelica

may well be, as *Time* magazine once described her, "the most influential Roman Catholic woman in America."

"We never thought it would be this big or this beautiful," says Mother Angelica, a small woman who, as a cloistered nun, sits for her interview with me behind a grating, as she does with all guests. She precedes our talk with an apology for being late (by only five minutes) because she has been teaching the other sisters a catechism class. She is reflecting on the 20th anniversary of EWTN — a "miracle," as she calls it — but also on the shrine itself, another miracle. "I think it is going to give people courage. They lack awe — of the real presence of Jesus in the Eucharist. And they lack courage — they won't fight for anything. They have no guts. I think what they experience when they walk into the church is courage. That's why it was built."

That remark is pure Mother Angelica, for whom reality is a heady mix of divine intervention, practical problems, and obstacles to be overcome with a mix of grit, considerable leadership skills, and faith in God. Mother Angelica's own life, as she tells it, has been a series of miraculous healings (she has suffered from a number of painful ailments), heavenly visions (including a visit from St. Michael the Archangel, who told her where to plant her EWTN short-wave signal), direct communications from God, and direct confrontations with other Catholics whose devotion may not be so intense or so tradition-minded as hers. You either loathe Mother Angelica, or you believe in her all the way; there's hardly any middle ground.

No Business Plan, No Budget

The same goes for EWTN itself, a multimedia company that has no business plan, no growth strategy, and no financing apparatus beyond the hope that it will find \$2.4 million a month to cover its expenses. Now a radio ministry, a publishing company (turning out "mini-books" written by Mother Angelica herself), and an Internet player as well as a cable network, it's a company that is run on nothing more than prayers — literally.

Knock on the door of the small office in Irondale that houses the staff of EWTN's website (widely respected as a major resource of Catholic documents and lore), at the wrong time, say, 3 p.m. on a weekday as I did, and you may not find anyone inside right away. That's because the majority of the staff is probably in the office's modest chapel praying the chaplet of divine mercy, St. Faustina's prayer recited at the traditional hour of Christ's death. Go at noon to the larger chapel in EWTN's nearby headquarters building, and you'll find a huge contingent of EWTN's employees at Mass (about 70 percent are Catholic; EWTN is not just for Catholics; in a day when few channels provide family fare, EWTN is a haven for "safe" programming), along with a daily contingent of pilgrims. Even at 7 a.m., when EWTN airs a live daily Mass, you'll see employees who have risen at dawn to attend. This is the real thing.

EWTN calls itself the "global Catholic network," but it doesn't really keep track of who is actually watching its programs among the more than 60 million households it reaches. There's no such thing as a Nielson rating at EWTN. Mother Angelica recalls the vice president of another network asking her what EWTN's rating was. She responded that she didn't care. The vice president was indignant: "You don't care? That's our gospel!" To which Mother Angelica replied crisply, "That's your problem."

There's no such thing as a budget at EWTN either, and there never has been. Mother Angelica

explains: "We never had a committee. We never had a parish to help us. We started with \$200, and we went from there."

Today, EWTN has a small accounting department to make sure the staff gets its paychecks (salaries are sometimes sacrifices for new employees but are generally about the industry standard), pay bills, and count donations, but the chief financing strategy is, as with all things at EWTN, prayer. Seriously. Says A. Scott Hults, communications director, "Throughout its 20 years, we have looked to the providence of God to provide for our needs, and He has. No more, and for the most part, no less. If we need a piece of equipment and have the money, we buy it. If a piece of equipment breaks, and we can't fix it, if we have the money, we replace it. If we want to build something, we build it as we can pay for it. Sometimes it takes longer, but that's how we do it. We operate very close to break-even each month."

Mother Angelica's motto is: God will provide. She even brags that EWTN "has never made money." The main fundraising method consists of her occasionally saying at the end of her show, "Don't forget to put us between your gas and electric bill. Bye now." That message also appears on EWTN's website, where visitors are invited to contribute via credit card. Although the network does have some wealthy donors who have written it large checks, it does not do mass mailings or formal solicitations like most nonprofits. To celebrate its 20th anniversary, EWTN will be hosting — instead of a black-tie gala for wealthy Catholics as potential contributors — a party only for staff and their families. Even the network's anniversary merchandise — shirts, mugs, and the like — aren't for sale to viewers and listeners but for gifts to cable operators to thank them for carrying EWTN.

The money comes in, Mother Angelica insists, because EWTN is "a work of God. He has planned it, provided for it, graced it." She adds: "I am always amazed that we have come this far, because when our dear Lord started this thing, I would have never believed this. I thought we'd just make some programs, really, because there were no Catholic programs much of anywhere. And so as it evolved, I was always surprised. It was not ever under my control. It was never a goal. I don't even know what I thought. I didn't have a thought. I just always try to listen to the Lord. A lot of things didn't make sense. But who am I to question?"

Miracles in Ohio

If you look at the history of EWTN, you might conclude that only divine providence could account for the way a nun who admits that she knew nothing about television, radio, publishing, or the Internet has managed to establish an international presence in all these media. Without, she claims, an ounce of forethought.

Born in 1923 in Canton, Ohio, Mother Angelica, then Rita Rizzo, had a troubled childhood. Her father abandoned her and her mother, Mae Rizzo, when she was an infant. Growing up poor in an era when divorce was still taboo, she was subjected to ridicule by her classmates and teachers. She still remembers the nuns who taught her in parochial school as the meanest people on earth. Mother and daughter weren't even regular Sunday Mass-goers, and young Rita had little formal education, working at her mother's dry-cleaning shop from an early age. She was not, suffice it to say, an ideal candidate for a religious vocation.

But at age 20, she was healed — miraculously, she says — of debilitating stomach pain after making a novena to St. Thérèse of Lisieux at the urging of a woman in her neighborhood believed to have the

stigmata, the wounds of Christ. Rita Rizzo's life changed instantly. "Unquestionably, that was the day I found God and really began to pray in an entirely new way," she recalls. "It was the first time I really recognized God's active role in my life. I fell in love with God." She began to pray constantly at a nearby church, and she concluded that Jesus wanted her to become a nun.

Her mother was devastated when her only child and only friend went to Cleveland to enter a Poor Clare convent in August 1944. But her attitude changed. Mae Rizzo eventually joined the Poor Clares herself and was professed as Sister Mary David in 1961. She joined her daughter's convent and was present at EWTN's formal dedication in 1981 (Mother Angelica still giggles mischievously when she remembers that her mother called her "mother" as a sign of respect). Sister Mary David died in 1982 at age 83, and her body rests in the crypt of the monastery in Hanceville, where all the Alabama Poor Clares, including Mother Angelica herself, will be buried.

Mother Angelica ended up in Alabama because of another miracle, as she tells the story. In 1946, at age 23, she was paralyzed in an accident with a scrubbing machine while cleaning the floors of a Poor Clare convent in Canton, where she was then living. Lying in a hospital bed, she prayed to God and promised that if she ever walked again, she would build Him a monastery in the South. (The choice of region seemed purely arbitrary: "I have no idea why I said that," she says.) Soon she was walking, but not without the aid of crutches and a back brace. She would be dependent on both for the next half-century and also in constant pain. She jokes that she quickly learned to be more specific in her prayers. "I asked to walk," she jokes, "I didn't ask to walk comfortably."

Visions in Alabama

She now had a promise to keep but no money. With permission from their abbess, she and others in her convent established St. Peter's Fishing Lures, a mail-order business that generated cash for the move to the South. She wrote letters to southern bishops, asking if they wanted her, and Bishop Thomas Toolen of what was then the Mobile-Birmingham diocese in Alabama wrote back first. In July 1961, she and a small group of nuns moved to Irondale, where she set up the first Poor Clare monastery in the state and became its abbess.

Mother Angelica's media life began in the 1970s when she started giving talks about Catholicism, and her listeners started requesting copies of her remarks. Her fellow nuns helped her write them down, print them, and mail them out. Those were the famous Mother Angelica mini-books. To this day, the collection is available free of charge from EWTN to anyone who asks (as are rosaries). Her television career began later in the decade when she taped a series of videos at a Birmingham station for televangelist Pat Robertson's Christian Broadcasting Network. When she learned in 1981 that the station intended to air a movie denying Christ's resurrection, she took her show elsewhere — to her monastery's garage.

Growth of the new network was fairly rapid. In the beginning, carrying only a few hours of programming a day, EWTN reached 60,000 homes. Over the past 20 years that number has swelled more than a thousandfold. With the exception of a few major U.S. cities — namely New York and Los Angeles, where competition to be part of a basic cable package is particularly cutthroat — EWTN is available just about everywhere in America during some, if not all, hours of the day to anyone with a television set and a cable subscription. Up until a month ago, in North America, the only countries that didn't get EWTN on television were Cuba, with its Communist government, and Canada, whose regulatory structure discourages religious programming. Canadian bureaucrats just

succumbed.

In 1993, EWTN launched WEWN, a shortwave radio station, the world's largest privately owned facility of its kind. The money came from the late Piet Derksen, a Dutch leisure-industry billionaire who had never met Mother Angelica until he spotted her in a hotel lobby in Rome. Ask her how she came to start the shortwave operation, and she'll tell you it was the archangel Michael — literally. She saw him on a hilltop near Irondale, and he told her to build it there. So she did, even though experts told her it wasn't an ideal location.

In 1996, she launched her radio ministry, supplying free AM/FM feed to Catholic radio stations that now reach 234 million potential listeners across the United States. "That was a watershed year for us," says EWTN vice president for marketing Christopher Wegemer. That year EWTN also went global, with satellite feeds going out worldwide.

Latin America has been a key target, and EWTN now reaches an estimated 14 million Hispanic television viewers. Walk into the radio station in Irondale at the right time, and you might think that it is an exclusively Spanish-language operation (EWTN's Web site is also in Spanish as well as English). Via satellite and shortwave, EWTN and WEWN also reach into Europe, the Pacific, and parts of Africa. And as Catholic seminaries worldwide install satellite dishes, the number of people connected to EWTN grows. Says Wegemer, "Mother Angelica says knock on every door that we can. That has been our marketing tool. And pray that the Lord will open the doors."

Running on Faith

The EWTN staff is a cadre of broadcast professionals, some of whom left successful careers in the secular world after feeling called to Irondale. They seem to toe the company line happily and naturally. Divine providence is boss in EWTN parlance. Company chairman Bill Steltemeier, whom Mother Angelica tapped early on after spotting him during a talk in 1978, says he can't look back. "The Lord did it. I don't know how He did it, but He did it."

Other religious groups, Catholic and non-Catholic, have tried to build a media empire like EWTN's. In fact, when EWTN started sending signals in 1981, it entered a field that already had several established religious cable networks. Of all of those, including the Christian Broadcasting Network, EWTN is the only one remaining in full-time operation.

What is the EWTN difference? The network's president, Michael Warsaw, says it's that "EWTN is doing God's will." The lesson of EWTN "isn't what we've done, it's how it was done," says Mother Angelica. "We didn't have a plan. We didn't have proof it was going to work. I know that is not the way a successful business would work. If you are going to sell neckties, you have to know that people want neckties. But you can't work for God that way because you don't know what He wants to sell. There is no guarantee of success. There's only a guarantee of pleasing God for doing His will."

Those who work for EWTN say they have seen it work miracles. Staff members report that relatives have returned to the Church after tuning in to *Mother Angelica Live* or *The Journey Home*, a call-in show hosted by Marcus Grodi, a convert who interviews other converts about their discovery of Catholicism. Letters, phone calls, and e-mails to EWTN's radio, television, and Web staff tell similar stories. Some people have written to say they were on the verge of suicide when they saw an EWTN program that convinced them not to do it. Says Thom Price, director of programming for the

shortwave operation, "If you turn on most radio stations today, truth is subjective. That's not the case with EWTN."

Crossing Swords

The ever-outspoken Mother Angelica has a sizable number of detractors, who regard her as the Rush Limbaugh of the Catholic airwaves. When she criticized a mimed stations of the cross featuring a woman playing Jesus and viewed by Pope John Paul II at World Youth Day in Denver in 1993, the liberal *National Catholic Reporter* took her to task.

In 1997, she garnered the wrath of Roger Cardinal Mahony of Los Angeles, who had issued a pastoral letter on the Eucharist, "Gather Faithfully Together." Mother Angelica read the letter, which described the consecration in the Mass as a representation of the Last Supper, and said she was "shocked" — on the air. She told her viewers that they could legitimately disobey Cardinal Mahony's letter because it displayed what she deemed an incomplete, and thus heretical, interpretation of Christ's real presence in the Eucharist. The cardinal, predictably, was not amused and demanded a retraction. She made a grudging apology on the air that Cardinal Mahony deemed unsatisfactory. He later attempted to have her reprimanded by the Vatican without success.

Not long after the Mahony contretemps, in January 1998, Mother Angelica threw away the crutches that she had used since her 1946 accident, after praying the rosary in her office with a woman from Italy. Her pain had vanished, and she stood up and walked unaided to appear on an EWTN program, *Life on the Rock*, aimed at younger Catholics. EWTN staffers literally danced for joy at the latest miracle. But an article in *Commonweal* magazine noted acerbically: "Mother's timing was nothing if not opportune. Surely, for those with eyes to see (especially in Rome and weasely American chanceries), heaven was signaling its interests in the Poor Clare network executive's contretemps with Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles."

Mother Angelica also tangled briefly with Birmingham's current bishop, David E. Foley. In 1999, Bishop Foley decreed that all priests in his diocese were to face the congregation when saying Mass. That ended the custom at EWTN of having the priests who celebrated televised liturgies or said Mass in its chapels face away from the people in attendance — the norm before the Second Vatican Council but a rare practice nowadays. Critics had complained that EWTN was trying to make a political statement, using its priests' posture at Mass to cast aspersions on lax post-Vatican II rituals elsewhere. Mother Angelica promptly complied with Bishop Foley's order, however, and he presided over the consecration of the Blessed Sacrament shrine at her new monastery in Hanceville later that year.

Growing Pains

Right now, EWTN's biggest problem isn't criticism but space. It still has only one studio, where it produces the majority of its television programming, and backdrops change from hour to hour. And the network can't build enough new structures to keep up with its burgeoning operations. "In my 16 years here, there has always been some kind of construction going on," says Rev. Joseph Mary Wolfe, who came to EWTN in 1985 as an engineer. In 1993, he was ordained as the first priest in the Franciscan Missionaries of the Eternal Word, a new order founded by Mother Angelica to further Catholic communications. The order has a friary on the EWTN grounds and also a seminary,

accredited by the Pontifical Catholic University of Puerto Rico.

Mother Angelica built her monastery in Hanceville because her cloistered Poor Clares, who also lived until recently on the crowded EWTN campus, needed more solitude for contemplation. As is so often the case with Mother Angelica, divine intervention played a key role in the move. In 1995, she says, Jesus told her to "build Me a temple where you will live, and I will help those who help you." Four families who wanted to remain anonymous soon donated the money to pay for the land, the monastery, and the shrine. (The monastery and shrine remain financially independent from EWTN.) Some 32 nuns now reside at the monastery in Hanceville with Mother Angelica: "There is no dearth of vocations," she laughs. A few externs — nuns who live outside the monastery — add to their number and make up what Mother Angelica considers the perfect-size religious congregation.

One tries to be skeptical about EWTN but instead walks away in wonder. Raymond Arroyo, the network's news director, who wound up at EWTN after interviewing Mother Angelica for a 1996 article, says: "We get letters and e-mails from the Philippines, Malta, Puerto Rico, Africa, Lebanon, Britain, and Australia when we broadcast the Holy Father — now that is the universal Church in action. Mother's vision and technology have allowed us for the first time in history to reach the entire Church with the pope's teachings. We have five separate signals going out of here 24 hours a day — each programmed independently. Who would have thought a nun from Canton, Ohio, could do that? But she'll tell you it was the Holy Spirit. And after seeing it up close, I believe her."

As for Mother Angelica, she doesn't take herself — or the role she played in building, managing, and nurturing EWTN for the last 20 years — too seriously. After all, as she constantly points out, it was God, not she who did the work. She laughs again: "I think if you are ignorant enough, the Lord helps you out or you wind up in jail."



Copyright 1981 U.P.I.

United Press International

August 15, 1981, Saturday, AM cycle

SECTION: Domestic News

LENGTH: 300 words

DATELINE: BIRMINGHAM, Ala.

BODY:

A new religious television network operated by an order of nuns broadcast its first programs Saturday night to 300,000 subscribers on cable systems across the United States.

Ironically, the programs broadcast from Birmingham were not seen there.

Mother Angelica, who established the Eternal Word Television Network, said Mountain Brook Cable Co. was the only local firm with facilities to pick up the programs sent to the Weststar III satellite. That firm, however, had not signed a contract to carry the programs.

Mother Angelica and 12 other nuns from Our Lady of the Angels Monastery gathered with 12 lay employees in the monastery chapel for a prayer service before holding a processional to a nearby studio for the 7 p.m. EDT switch-on.

An hour-long documentary on the Shroud of Turin kicked off the programming, followed by an introduction to the network by **Mother Angelica** in which she previewed the scheduled programming.

The nun said she hopes to expand the four-hour-a-day broadcast to 24 hours by January 1984.

"This will give us two years to build," she said. "I've just got to depend on God to provide."

Mother Angelica has to scrape up \$960,000 for the equipment she has had installed and enough to pay the \$60,000 a month for the satellite, plus additional money for the lay staff salaries.

She plans to begin a direct mail campaign in September or October to raise money. If all else fails, she said she may use one 60-second public service announcement each day to ask for support, but she does not believe that will be necessary.

Mother Angelica said God directed her to establish the television network. She said the aim of its programming will be simple.

"I hope that people will get hope in God, themselves, their family and their country," she said.



Copyright 1981 Associated Press
All Rights Reserved

The Associated Press

These materials may not be republished without the express written consent of The Associated Press

August 14, 1981, Friday, PM cycle

SECTION: Domestic News

LENGTH: 359 words

HEADLINE: Chubby, Cheerful Anchor-Nun On The Eternal Word Network

BYLINE: By DIANA SMITH, Associated Press Writer

DATELINE: BIRMINGHAM, Ala.

BODY:

Mother Angelica says those of little faith thought the 13 nuns at Our Lady of the Angels Monastery were "a little touched in the head" when they decided to produce the nation's first Catholic cable television network.

But she said that with hard work, determination and "a lot of help from Lord," the Eternal Word Network will bounce a signal off the Westar III satellite Saturday evening and debut a daily, four-hour broadcast.

"We're after the man in the pew, the women who is suffering from heartache, the child who is lonely," she said. "I'm hoping we can teach without teaching, enlighten the heart and relax the body."

"Television is a tremendous medium, but there are some bad programs. Perhaps we can reverse the trend," she said. "In some ways, TV has taken families and made them into individuals."

The network, housed in a concrete-block studio next to the monastery, will reach an estimated 300,000 cable subscribers across the country from 7 to 11 p.m. EDT, with **Mother Angelica** as its chubby, cheerful anchor.

"Most people think we're a little bit touched in the head," she said Wednesday. "They say, 'You've got to be joking. A network run by 13 nuns?'"

She said building and equipping the studio the past two years and struggling for a spot on the satellite hasn't been easy since the nuns were novices to the intricacies of cable television.

She compared the monastery's problems breaking into cable to the obstacles a female doctor might have faced 20 years ago. "But I don't resent it," she said. "I'd be skeptical myself."

She already has her own cable program "**Mother Angelica Presents**," which she describes as a "nitty-gritty, sock it to 'em program" shot on location and in the studio.

The network, she said, will feature programs and movies for families.

An hour-long documentary on the Shroud of Turin will kick off Saturday's programming, followed by **Mother Angelica's** preview of the network's scheduled programs.

By 1984, **Mother Angelica** hopes to have a 24-hour network.

"The evolution of cable television will be tremendous by then. There are going to be so many changes. We're getting there just in time."
