

Strategic Management of Church Communications  
New Challenges, New Directions



## Direzione strategica della comunicazione nella Chiesa

**Nuove sfide, nuove proposte**

a cura di  
Juan Manuel Mora  
Diego Contreras  
Marc Carroggio

DIREZIONE STRATEGICA DELLA  
COMUNICAZIONE NELLA CHIESA:  
NUOVE SFIDE, NUOVE PROPOSTE

*Atti del 5° Seminario professionale  
sugli uffici comunicazione della Chiesa*

A cura di:

Juan Manuel Mora - Diego Contreras - Marc Carroggio

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHURCH COMMUNICATIONS:  
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*Proceedings of the Fifth Professional Seminar  
for Church Communications Offices*

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## PRESENTATION

When the Church authorities decide to provide their institution with a communications department, or when professionals are called in to take this task on, it is logical that the question of method should arise: How to communicate effectively in the Church field? How better to reach a public that is not only external but at times distant or even culturally remote from the Church? How to channel the energies of members of the organisation in favour of communication?

Many questions arise when studying the role, organisation, and effectiveness of a department of communications within the Church. The fifth Professional Seminar organised by the School of Church Communications of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross focussed on one particular aspect, which may be summarised in very few words: the effectiveness of a communications department depends to a large extent on proper management, in other words on the competency of the people whose responsibility it is to identify short- and long-term objectives, to decide upon method, to exploit resources to the full, and to establish relationships which help to achieve the goal.

Asking “how” necessarily poses questions as to the “what”, “why” and “what for” of communication in the Church: its content, its motives and its final purpose. In order to be able to answer these queries, we must maintain clear ideas regarding institutional communication, management mentality, the essence of the Christian message, and cultural contexts.

To put it another way, communications management in the Church involves integrating highly varied aspects. The Seminar sought to bring together different viewpoints – business, doctrinal, journalistic – which together help us to undertake such a complex task.

The contribution of Joaquín Navarro-Valls was particularly valuable because it came a year after the death of John Paul II and made known a “story as yet untold”. It was a revealing account of the work of journalists during the period of the illness and death of John Paul II. Navarro-Valls spoke from the privileged perspective of the Holy See Press Office, where more than 9000 professionals from all over the world were accredited.

Navarro-Valls’ words may be helpful in understanding the dynamics of institutional communication within the Church, although of course in many ways this is an extraordinary case: the fascinating personality of John Paul II; the significance he had from more than a billion Catholics; the boundless affection felt by people of all beliefs; the demand of the communications media which managed to recognise the exceptional nature of the event; the professionalism of the Vatican communications team.

The truth is that many of the circumstances that marked the month of April 2005 are in some way unrepeatable, nonetheless it is worth going over them again, not only to try and understand the event as a whole, but also in order to gain a clearer idea of the role played by the communications media in that historic episode.

Over the following pages, we will present some of the principal ideas from Joaquín Navarro-Valls’ lecture. The transcription of the lecture itself does not appear in this volume because the text is still partly being prepared; we do not doubt it will find an appropriate space in some future publication that will also include other pieces by the man who for more than twenty years was director of the Holy See Press Office. Without doubt that book – which we hope to be able to read soon – will be a valuable tool for professionals associated with institutional communication.

## LESSONS FROM THE EVENTS OF APRIL 2005

In order to summarise Joaquín Navarro-Valls’ profound and fascinating lecture in a few paragraphs we can, perhaps, alter the order in which it was delivered. Let us begin here with the conclusion: What did we see, what did we hear, what were we able to read concerning

the sickness and death of John Paul II in the world communications media? It is not too much to say that we witnessed live coverage on a planetary scale.

What the communications media primarily did was deliver punctual and relevant information concerning the evolution of John Paul II's illness. At first they did so in a somewhat anguished manner due to the logistical difficulties correspondents had to face, but later they managed to achieve a tone characterised by serenity and respect.

The public also made its preferences known. Audience figures for news programmes and reports were very high; and when it became clear that John Paul II was about to "depart" many even wanted to leave for Rome to say farewell, to accompany him in his final moments, to return the visit the Pope had made to almost all the countries on earth. The poignant and moving influx of hundreds of thousands of people, ready to spend days and nights camping out in the open air, was itself an eloquent phenomenon and went on to become part of the live coverage.

In Navarro-Valls' view, over these months there was an evident "complicity" between John Paul II and the communications media, a complicity that had existed throughout his pontificate. The media brought the Pope's message to the public at large. John Paul II did not exploit the communications media, but he did understand its dynamics and, above all, he knew that news reaches its audience – including the Catholic audience – through the media with a speed and impact difficult to achieve through other channels.

Just as millions of people wanted to come to Rome to pay a final homage to the Pope it could be said that, in their own way, the media with their excellent coverage also paid their own last homage to John Paul II.

This "complicity" with the communications media arose from a profound conviction of John Paul II, a conviction that later came to extend to his collaborators and that the Press Office, as the body entrusted with media relations, undertakes to express in concrete actions, above all by identifying objectives. In other words the *Sala Stampa* sees itself as the organisation whose job it is to facilitate the work of journalists. On the subject of the events of April 2005, Navarro-Valls affirmed that the objective was "to convey vital information to journal-

ists using all technological means available, to give them assurances that they will receive information without delay, and in this way to favour their work”.

Clarity of objectives is a fundamental factor for decision-making and the organisation of work, as well as for the provision of infrastructures. Service to journalists is a basic principle of professional communication, which systematises and gives a hierarchical structure to activities.

It was against this background that, in the early months of 2005, the Press Office implemented a series of measures that had the aim of facilitating the work of reporters. We are talking about a standing population of regular Rome correspondents numbering about 400 journalists from 35 countries. To these were added the special correspondents to reach a final figure of 9000 accredited journalists. The Press Office worked hard on their behalf: It opened a special bureau for the issue of accreditation; it set up another press office, of greater capacity and fully equipped with all technical facilities from where it was possible to follow minute by minute what was happening in the main area; it released declarations, also in audio-visual format, in various languages; it signed a deal with an Italian television channel (*Telepace*) for the retransmission of the press conferences and briefings that took place in the *Sala Stampa*, so that all journalists resident in Rome could at any time follow the latest events from their home or hotel; finally, it established a system for sending information to international news agencies, and messages to mobile phones and e-mail.

This entire series of measures was of direct and immediate service to journalists and ensured that they were able to work safely, that they knew what lines to follow and that they did not fear wildcat competition with all the disagreeable consequence it usually brings.

Service to journalists is associated with a second aspect: service to the institution for which one works, service to the truth of the news that is transmitted. Navarro-Valls explained the decision-making process within the Press Office in this exceptional case.

The work of any communicator begins with a considered analysis of the real situation from at least two points of view, identified by Navarro-Valls.

In the first place, it is important to calculate precisely the scope of the news, the kind of interest it will arouse, the predictable media reaction. “Communication professionals,” Navarro-Valls pointed out, “know that any kind of information-giving operation, any communication plan, must begin with indispensable preparatory work: the precise definition of the event that is to be communicated. A prior analysis must be carried out, taking into account the potential audience, the range of interest (local, national, global), the main protagonists of the event and their communicative capacity. Without this preliminary stage – which is of a purely practical nature – the event runs the risk of simultaneously assuming multiple meanings, of being interpreted in different and even contradictory ways by the various media organisations”. This analysis must be carried out sufficiently in advance, because it is important that the parameters of an event be clearly defined if it is to be communicated correctly.

In the second place, the work of communication calls for reflection upon the event itself: it is not enough to foresee its repercussions, it is necessary to understand its nature. In this case, it was vital to consider the way in which to deal – in a news sense – with the sickness and, in the final analysis, the death of the Pope. Navarro-Valls presented the matter in the following terms: “What kind of event was it? It was a death, the crucial moment of a person’s existence, and specifically the death of a Pope, a person of great importance for the world. One question that arose was that of excess, of giving too much information on the progress of an illness. What we asked ourselves was: do we have the right to remove this part of John Paul II’s biography? In seeking an answer we drew inspiration from the Pope’s own life story in which, for example, he had never sought to hide the trembling of his hands from the cameras. All that concerned John Paul II was to carry out his ministry to the end, and if this meant showing his limitations it did not concern him in the slightest. Consequently, we felt that we could not remove this fundamental segment from his life story. We felt we had to recount it, concentrating on biographical elements without embellishing it or deviating attention to other things: giving information on his illness and on his reaction to the illness (what he decided, what he said). In other words, ours was formally a very sober line, but closely related to the biography of the ailing Pope”. This, in brief, was the line followed by the Press Office in its activities.



There can be no doubt, that this transparency, so typical of John Paul II, disarmed the communications media just as it disarmed the world, which found itself face to face with a completely vulnerable human being entirely committed to his mission, to his vocation. There was no space for geo-political considerations, for the logic of power, for the formality of those who do not want to look suffering and death in the eye. John Paul II was an old dying man, the common father, the head of the Church, who was sending out an unforgettable message: John Paul II taught people how to live and how to die.

Journalists understood the moment and were able to convey it. That intimate complicity between the Pope and the media was created once again. In this sense too, John Paul II's final days of life remained coherent with the earlier years of his pontificate.

Giving information on the critical stage of a sickness is a difficult task. The fact that Navarro-Valls was a doctor before he became a journalist was a vital factor. He was a doubly authorised spokesperson, sure of the terminology, and capable of interacting with doctors and with journalists. In this case it proved easy to apply the classic principle of institutional communication: unifying the source in order to avoid the discordance that arises when various people make uncoordinated declarations on the same topic. Rather than being a way to control information, in this case the motivation was a desire for coherence: all the medical bulletins came from a single source, so that there were none of those symptoms of anxiety and nervousness that are usually produced when there are discrepancies, contradictions and leaks of information.

However the centralisation of the source – *the single voice* – can only come about when the spokesperson has access to people and to decisions. Navarro-Valls was very clear on this point: “All of this would have been absolutely impossible without direct access to the people and to the decision-making processes. Without such access the work of communication is not possible. This was something that had already been achieved during many years of work with John Paul II, not something attained during those particular moments: that would not have been possible. If communicators do not feel sure of themselves when they communicate, then they cannot transmit security to the journalists listening to them”.

Navarro-Valls provided an example. “During those months, as John Paul II’s demise became imminent, it had to be decided at what moment to begin leaving the *Sala Stampa* open all night. The possibility was considered on a number of occasions. As we had access to the doctors and to all the information, we were able to decide correctly, in such a way as not to create unnecessary alarm or to give rise to delays which would have been extremely serious. In fact, the Press Office began to remain open all night only from 1 April, the eve of John Paul II’s death. Without access to the people and to the decision-making processes, operational communication decisions cannot be made, or at least one runs a clear risk of making mistakes”.

Access to people and to decision-making processes. This was John Paul II’s approach: to remain accessible to the people who would then have to communicate with journalists. It was for this reason that during those months of 2005 there was no need to invent or to improvise, but to uphold the traditions of the preceding 25 years.

This brings us to the starting point of Navarro-Valls’ talk: faced with an extraordinary communicative task, it is important to be prepared. In order to meet a challenge of such huge dimensions it is necessary to have developed a certain amount of know-how beforehand. As far as the events of the year 2005 are concerned, this principle was applied to the infrastructures, which proved capable of looking after 9000 accredited journalists, thanks also to the experience of the Jubilee Year and of the great beatification and canonisation ceremonies. But the principle was also applied to strategies, which were not improvised but ended up becoming a part of everyday work. John Paul II had inspired communication strategies throughout his 25-year pontificate, and all that had to be done was to maintain them.

## APPLICATIONS IN ORDINARY COMMUNICATIONS WORK

We can conclude this synopsis by enumerating some of the lessons of the event we have been considering. Institutional communication is a complex activity that calls for well-trained professionals. One of its principal aims is to provide quality service to journalists, using all the technological means available. Fair play in dealings with the media

gives rise to a “complicity” – though always while respecting mutual independence – thanks to which messages can reach large audiences. Communication calls for profound analysis and reflection prior to divulging content, because this is the only way to serve the truth of the information being communicated. A fundamental factor in this process is the communicator’s access to the authorities of the institution for which he or she works and to the decision-making processes.

These characteristics, which define the communication of an extraordinary event, are also valid for the ordinary work. This became clear throughout the various sessions of the Professional Seminar.

Over the days of the Seminar, formal and informal discussions among participants often led to conclusions that underlined the reasons that had led to organising the Seminar in the first place. Communications departments are not just transmitters of information, issuers of press releases and of official declarations. Their work is not limited to the repetition of ancient professional rites. New communication scenarios call for departments to be sources for ideas, workshops for projects, centres for contacts and platforms for dialogue. These requirements call, in turn, for enterprising and creative management that can make long-term strategies compatible with a daily work schedule made up of apparently minor activities; that possesses clear criteria to identify priority objectives; that is capable of drawing up adequate communication plans. Heads of department must, then, develop management qualities for the benefit of the institution for which they work.

In the wake of fifth Professional Seminar, the School of Church Communications of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross feels stimulated to carry on along the road it has taken, and to continue to offer professionals a space for reflection, study and the exchange of experiences.

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