

VERSIONE PROVVISORIA

“Turning the iceberg upside down: how to show the ‘other’ news about the Church”

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I am in a somewhat unusual position this afternoon, to say the least. In effect, I’m a journalist who has been asked to give advice to communications experts for the institution I cover as to how it can more effectively “sell” itself. It’s a bit like a political journalist sitting down with members of a campaign staff as to how they can better position their candidate, or a financial writer giving tips on crisis management to vice-presidents for corporate communications of Fortune 500 companies. In other words, it’s a situation that flirts with a conflict of interest. As a journalist, my interest really shouldn’t be presenting the Catholic Church in the best possible light, but rather telling the truth about the Church, warts and all – whether that ends up making the Church look good or not. “Without fear or favor” is supposed to be the operating principle of the journalistic enterprise, and therefore it’s not entirely clear that a journalist, as such, ought to be offering seminars in spin, even to people who communicate on behalf of an august institution such as the Catholic Church.

For that reason, I’d like to begin by making a careful distinction about the role I see myself playing here today. I’m tempted to call this a “Jesuitical” bit of mental gymnastics, though knowing something about the long and checkered history of relations between Opus Dei and the Jesuits, perhaps that’s not quite the right vocabulary! In any event, here it is: I’m not here today in my capacity as a journalist who covers the Catholic Church. Instead, I’m here as a Catholic with some experience of professional journalism. In other words, I’m not speaking this afternoon as a reporter but rather as a believer, and in that capacity it seems entirely appropriate that I would want to help my Church tell its own story, drawing on what I know about the dynamics of the modern journalism business.

I’d also like to offer a few brief words about my purchase on our subject. In my work, I move back and forth between two different worlds, that of the specialized Catholic press and that of the mass market secular media. My column “All Things Catholic” is written for a readership that would score off the charts on any test of Catholic literacy; if I were to commit the unpardonable gaffe of writing that the Salesians run the Angelicum, for example, within 10 minutes a fusillade of e-mails from Dominicans the world over, not to mention Catholic pedants of every stripe, would strain the capacity of my in-box. On the other hand, I also work for the mass-market press, particularly CNN, which has given me a feel for audiences that have never heard of either the Salesians or the Angelicum, and frankly don’t see why they should care.

Today I’m going to focus on that second world, since that’s where most people in your backyards, including, truth to be told, most of our Catholic people, form their impressions of the Church. I’ll give you two CNN stories illustrating the two different levels of awareness I’m talking about.

The first dates to July 2002, when Pope John Paul II visited Toronto for World Youth Day. I was doing color commentary the morning of the papal Mass, situated high atop Downsview Park outside Toronto on a rickety TV platform. Immediately next to me was the crew from NBC, whose own talking head was my friend and colleague George Weigel. As it happened, the weather that morning before the pope arrived was dreadful – heavy rain, lightning, and strong wind. The platform was shaking violently, and at one point somebody began shouting “Evacuate!” Most people complied, but not me or George, since we both had live shots coming up and neither one of us was willing to be cheated out of our 15 minutes of

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fame. To get the punchline, you need to recall that George is seen as an avatar of the Catholic right, and while I've never thought of myself as particularly ideological, certainly the paper I work for has the reputation of being quite liberal. Thus it was that, just as the storm reached its crescendo, George turned to me off-camera and said: "You know, if we die together here today, it will be the ultimate demonstration of the Catholicity of the church!" A great line, of course, but one that would never work on the air, because it requires far too much inside Catholic baseball to get the joke.

Here's the second story. It's set three years later, during the days immediately following the death of John Paul II in Rome, when I was doing nearly round-the-clock commentary. One evening just before the funeral Mass, I was on CNN's "News Night" program with Aaron Brown, which finished at roughly 5:00 am Rome time. I recall sitting afterwards with Brown atop the Urban College, which was CNN's location during that period, looking down at St. Peter's Square. Aaron is a terrific journalist, but not especially religious, and frankly had come to Rome not quite sure what the fuss was about. Looking down at those vast crowds that swelled the square and surrounding streets, however, with millions of people waiting 36 hours or more for a few fleeting seconds before the body of the pope, passing the time in a sort of prayerful quiet not typically associated with vast throngs of humanity, Aaron said: "You know, there's something I just don't get about this religion thing ... but now I know that I need to get it."

I'm talking today not about people who would get George Weigel's joke, but rather people closer to the reaction of Aaron Brown – needing a sort of "a-ha" experience to show them why all this matters in the first place.

In that regard, it's worth saying that we gather here today at an especially propitious moment for reflection upon Church communications, because those of us who are Americans have just lived through a six-day seminar in how to get things right. I'm referring to the April 15-20 Pastoral Visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the United States, which by most accounts was a massive communications success from the point of view of the Catholic Church. For six days, the Holy Father and the Church were the dominant stories in the American media, and the preponderance of that coverage was overwhelmingly positive. We saw a pope who comes off as kind and candid, and a Church which, despite its obvious difficulties, seems dynamic and alive. While I would submit that those impressions broke through to public awareness largely because they happen to be accurate, I'm also not naïve enough to believe it was an accident. Church communications professionals in the United States, beginning with officials from the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops as well as communications officers for the Archdioceses of Washington and New York, did a masterful job of assisting the press in bringing the story of the pope's trip to the broad American public. Rather than attempting to impose a storyline on the experience, they allowed the trip to speak for itself, and in the end that choice made all the difference.

Yet, of course, the recent American Catholic experience with the press is not entirely one of sweetness and light. The Catholic Church in the United States is still reeling from the massive blow to its public standing inflicted by the recent sexual abuse crisis, and the overwhelmingly negative press coverage which both triggered it and flowed from it. That experience too informs my perspective today, because I would submit that in the United States over the last seven years or so, we have seen both the best and the worst of Church communications. I'm not trying to peddle a facile defense of my profession by suggesting that somehow the overwhelmingly negative coverage of the crisis, and the largely positive coverage of the death of John Paul II and the recent visit of Benedict XVI, somehow balance the scales or cancel one another out. What I am proposing is that by taking all these experiences into view, some wisdom may reveal itself about how the story of the Church can be told to the modern world, so that the full truth about Catholicism comes more regularly

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into view – an institution with its flaws and counter-cultural elements, to be sure, but also one with a massive capacity to energize forces for good.

I will begin with two general observations about the Church and the news business, and then offer three recommendations for those of you involved in trying to tell the Church's story in the modern media environment.

Observations

Both of the observations I am about to make will no doubt strike those of you in this room as terribly obvious, but I nevertheless think it's important to have them "on the record" as a springboard for the recommendations to follow.

(1) Routine Religious Activity is not 'News'

Those of you involved in Church communications face a basic, if terribly frustrating, obstacle: for the most part, routine religious activity does not count as "news" for the secular press. Unlike politics, finance and sports, religion becomes news only when something out of the ordinary, controversial, or exotic happens, which means that mainstream media coverage of religion is often episodic, random, and rarely penetrates to the heart of religious experience. Reporting on religion in the mainstream press is often like trying to display a three-dimensional object in a two-dimensional space – only bits and pieces come into view, often producing badly distorted impressions of what the real object actually looks like.

I realize, of course, that there are many exceptions to these sweeping generalizations. Some of you are blessed with terrific religion writers in your local newspapers, and very diligent correspondents and producers with your local TV. What I'm describing is nevertheless a general culture in the secular press, and even the exceptions tend to prove the rule. One result is that a terribly complex beat is often covered by people without much background or interest in religion, a prescription for mischief and heartache.

Let me give you a recent example drawn from the papal trip to the United States. On Friday, April 18, Cardinal William Levada, Prefect of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, took part in a luncheon for journalists hosted by *Time* magazine. The next day, the *New York Times* carried a front-page story based on a quick exchange as Levada was leaving the room. The story suggested that the Vatican might be preparing to waive the period of prescription in canon law, meaning the statute of limitations, for bringing a charge of sexual abuse against a minor. (Currently prescription applies at ten years after the victim turns 18). The next day the Vatican issued a denial, creating the appearance of back-tracking. In reality, however, the story was based on a simple misunderstanding. Under norms approved by Pope John Paul II in February 2003, the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith already had the power to dispense from prescription, which is evidently what Levada had in mind. In other words, he wasn't talking about a possible change, but one that had already occurred. Anyone with a basic sense of the history of this story would have known that; the fact that America's premier newspaper didn't perform such a basic level of fact-checking is indicative of the general climate I'm trying to describe. The problem is not hostility to the Church, so much as ignorance and benign neglect – the consequences of which, as this example indicates, are not always so benign.

Because religion isn't generally considered news, the problem with much religion reporting is rarely so much text as context. During the peak period of the sexual abuse crisis in the spring of 2002, the scandals in the Church were front page news every day, and deservedly so. Yet there was no equivalent attention to the 2.7 million children who were educated in Catholic schools in the United States in 2002, the nearly 10 million persons, including a disproportionate number of women and children, given assistance by Catholic Charities USA, and the \$2.8 billion spent by Catholic hospitals in providing uncompensated health care to millions of poor and low-income Americans, again including a disproportionate

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number of children. Obviously, if you want to tell the whole story of the Catholic Church's approach to children and their welfare, all of that deserves to be in the mix. The fact that it wasn't is not, for the most part, due to explicit bias; it's rather that a sex scandal in the Church is considered news, while teaching kids or handing out sandwiches or medicine – in other words, routine pastoral life – simply isn't.

There is a related problem here that's worth mentioning briefly, even if I don't have the time to develop it in a fully satisfactory way. I'm sure all of you here today are familiar with what Journalism 101 courses cover on day one, meaning how we decide if something is a news story: significance, novelty, and so on. One important component in those decisions is the "who" of the story – Madonna going shopping on Fifth Avenue may be a news story, but my doing so certainly is not. In other words, celebrities are considered newsworthy in a way that ordinary people are not. Applied to the Catholic Church, our "celebrities" are generally members of the hierarchy – something done by a bishop is more likely to get the attention of a news editor than the same act committed by a lay person. I recall, for example, that a BBC producer once called me for advice on a documentary they were producing about women in the Catholic Church. She asked for suggestions about someone in the Vatican with whom they might speak, and I replied that as fate would have it they were in luck, because the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences was in session that week, presided over by Harvard law professor Mary Ann Glendon, the first woman ever to head a pontifical academy. (Glendon has since, of course, gone on to become the Ambassador of the United States to the Holy See.) I explained Glendon's background for at least ten minutes, that she served as a Vatican representative to high-profile United Nations conferences on population and women in Cairo and Beijing during the 1990s, that she is among the best known commentators on Church affairs in the United States, all in addition to being the first woman to break the "glass ceiling" regarding pontifical academies in the Vatican. All things considered, I argued, she would be a fascinating voice to include in the BBC's mix.

The producer listened attentively, and then said something that speaks volumes about public perceptions: "I'm sorry," she said. "I must not have been clear. I meant that we're looking for someone from the Church."

What this producer meant, of course, is that she was looking for someone from the hierarchy. That reaction hints at a deeper problem, which is that much of the "other news" about Catholicism I mentioned above – education in Catholic schools, humanitarian assistance from Catholic charities, and health care from Catholic hospitals – is delivered by lay people, and is often difficult for outsiders to connect with their images of the Catholic Church as an institution. Indeed, much of this activity doesn't strike many reporters as "Church news" because it's not performed by someone wearing a Roman collar. That, too, represents a communications challenge with which we all have to come to terms.

(2) Conflict is the Motor Fuel of Story-Telling

Catholics sometimes grumble that the only time the media takes an interest in the Church is when there's some controversy brewing. Thus when the vast majority of parishes celebrate the Mass and the other sacraments in relative harmony, when they come together to serve the poor and to educate children without any fuss, it's not news; let one parish get into a fight over staffing or resources, however, or whether they like their pastor, and you can almost guarantee that squabble is going to make the local news.

Two points here need to be made.

First, this preoccupation with conflict isn't true just of the Catholic Church. It's a characteristic of news coverage generally, regardless of the institution or the beat. One of the reasons that politics is the mainstay of modern journalism is because it's all about conflict – the perpetual clash of competing interests and ideologies, with clear stakes and, usually, clear winners and losers. Second, the reason journalists fasten upon conflict is because we are at

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heart story-tellers, and conflict is what makes a story work. Resolutions in the last act of a drama make little sense if there isn't something to resolve. Without some struggle, some tension, some uncertainty about the outcome, stories simply don't work. This is an insight into drama at least as old as Sophocles, and the basics haven't changed much since his day. To wish that journalism were less prone to highlight conflict, therefore, is akin to wishing that hydrogen and oxygen in a certain combination were less prone to produce water – in other words, you're struggling against the natural order. The trick is not to convince reporters to avoid situations of conflict, but rather to offer the world models of how real differences can be managed humanely.

To take one example, I've been a bit surprised that the Vatican has not been more aggressive in trumpeting Pope Benedict's *motu proprio* on the Latin Mass as a Solomonic solution to one of the deepest conflicts in the post-Vatican II Catholic Church. Everyone knows that Catholics have deep divisions over liturgy. Often we lament those divisions, on the grounds that the Eucharist and the other sacraments are supposed to be our supreme moments of unity. That of course is correct so far as it goes, but I would submit that our divisions over liturgy are in fact a sign of real health – it shows that Catholics care deeply about worship, and they understand instinctively the bite of that old dictum *lex orandi, lex credendi* – “the rule of worship is the rule of faith.” In effect, the Holy Father has enshrined diversity as the solution to the deepest of these divisions, that between the advocates of the reformed post-conciliar Mass and the so-called Tridentine Rite, or the Missal of 1962. He's allowed Catholics to choose freely between the two rites, or to move back and forth between them as their spiritual needs indicate. It's a classic Catholic “both/and” solution to a seemingly “either/or” problem. In talking about the issue with the press, my inclination wouldn't be to play down the “liturgy wars” in the Church. Instead I would invite the world into our debates, so that the full importance of the pope's decision to license liturgical pluralism would become clear. For all those who think Catholicism is a robotic, Stepford Wives-esque monolith, with no room for internal diversity, this is one of those great stereotype-shattering developments. It's unfortunate that so far, this perception has not really taken hold – in part, I tend to think, because Catholics are generally allergic to airing our conflicts in public, not realizing that on the other side of every conflict is a possible story about creative resolution.

Suggestions

I'll conclude with three suggestions for how those of you involved in Church communications might go about telling your story in the media culture I've described, in which most of what we do doesn't come off as news, and when it does it's often because we're fighting amongst ourselves. These are no more than fleeting ideas, which, if they have any value at all, obviously have to be adapted to your local circumstances.

(1) Exploit both our Divisions and our Celebrities

In the American market for the first half of 2008, there's no doubt the big Catholic story has been the pope's visit to the United States. Speaking just for CNN, it's worth noting that we took three Masses in one week essentially bell-to-bell live on national television: the Mass in Nationals Park in Washington on April 17, the Mass at St. Patrick's Cathedral in New York on April 19, and the concluding Mass at Yankees Stadium on the afternoon of April 20. Not even during the period between the death of John Paul II and the election of Benedict XVI three years ago did national networks air three Catholic Masses, each lasting over two hours, in one week. This was, in effect, the most extensive week-long seminar in Catholicism ever offered by the American media.

All this provided a natural opportunity for Church communicators to “feed the beast” with local angles, such as:

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- Profiles on people from your cathedral community who traveled to see the pope;
- Organizing a session with local Catholic college or university people who participated in the pope's meeting with educators;
- Putting together a public inter-religious or ecumenical event to reflect on the pope's messages to leaders of other Christian churches and other faiths;
- An event with local experts on international affairs to analyze the pope's message to the United Nations, which would also be an occasion for your social ministry people to explain how your cathedral community translates the Church's social teaching into action on the local level;
- Inviting reporters to hang around after Mass at the cathedral one Sunday for thoughts from parishioners about what the trip meant, what impressions they now have of the pope, etc.
- Bringing together a "focus group" of Catholics of various backgrounds, ethnicities, ages, and outlooks for a kind of "state of the Church" conversation, inviting the media and the general public to listen in. Don't worry if they're not all singing from the same songbook – it will be a better story if they're not, and ultimately the story will be the Church's unity in diversity. While under ordinary circumstances that might not generate much interest, the pope's presence has created a heightened interest in the state of the Catholic soul.

By now, of course, much of the national momentum generated by Benedict's visit has already dissipated; the American media has moved on to the remaining Democratic primaries, the on-going drama of the polygamist sect in Texas, and other stories. At a less dramatic level, however, other stories which are either celebrity-driven, such as the pope's visit, or conflict-driven, will roll around again. Those rare occasions when the Church has the attention of the broader culture, whether it's exactly on the terms we might like or not, represent golden "teaching moments," and the trick is to take full advantage.

(2) Make the Local Church a Center for Insight on All Things Catholic

Beyond the immediate resonance of stories such as the pope's visit, I would encourage you to take an expansive view of your communications agenda. I want to challenge you, in fact, to take responsibility not just for narrating aspects of the pastoral life of your cathedral, but also for explaining broader trends and developments in the universal Church to your local public.

It should be no secret to those of you in this room that there is sometimes a deep cultural gap between the vocabulary and thought-world of the universal Catholic Church and of local cultures around the world, a situation which is forever pregnant with potential for misunderstanding. For the reasons I sketched above, you cannot rely upon the media to do the necessary work of translation, and neither is it sufficient to delegate this responsibility to a small caste of professional church communications "experts." My contention is that a higher degree of Catholic literacy will not take hold in American culture until every Catholic, and especially those of you who play leadership roles in our premier parish communities, come to think of yourselves as church communicators on the local level and in your own ambits of experience.

I'm appealing here, by the way, not merely to your altruistic commitment to the welfare of the Church, but also directly to your self-interest. Whether we like it or not, impressions about the global Church, the pope and the bishops often shape the prism through which people see what's happening in your cathedral, which means these impressions are your concern too.

To be clear, I am not suggesting that those of you in cathedral ministry become self-appointed spokespersons for the Vatican, or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, in your local media market. Indeed, I would encourage you to avoid anything that

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smacks of “spin” or selling soap; people sniff that out fairly easily, and are usually turned off by it. However, given that cathedrals are often located in urban settings with ready access to the media, as well as institutions of higher education, leaders in other faith communities, and other shapers of culture, you are uniquely positioned to unpack events in the Church, dispel rumors, provide context, and otherwise offer a basic course in “Catholicism 101” for the broader public, especially in those rare moments when the Church has the world’s attention.

To take just one example, you are all well aware that there’s a broad public interest these days in anything related to Islam; the *New York Times Book Review* devoted an entire issue a couple of weeks ago to recent titles on Islam. Cathedral staff might think about organizing an evening when the rector (or, better yet, the bishop) and a local imam sit down to discuss where things stand between the two faiths. Among other things, this would be an opportunity to explain what Benedict XVI was trying to say in his Regensburg address in September 2006, to comment on the legitimate issues of reciprocity and religious freedom that still have to be addressed, and to lay out what the future might hold – including plans for a meeting later in 2008 between the pope and signatories to a letter from 138 Muslim leaders inviting Christians into dialogue, the first time that a cross-section of Muslim leaders has reflected publicly on the theological common ground between Christians and Muslims.

Similar events could be organized around other topics where the Church intersects with important issues of the day, from bioethics to the 2008 elections. Over time, you could train journalists, academics, and the general public to regard the cathedral as a valued center for conversation and information about the life of the Church.

(3) Communications Ministry

To some extent, both of the foregoing suggestions involve piggy-backing upon global or national events, bringing in the life of your local cathedral, so to speak, through the back door. The more basic and enduring challenge you face, however, is to communicate the daily life of your local faith community without depending upon external news angles to make it relevant.

I don’t have any silver bullet solutions, but I do have a premise: The problem is not that routine pastoral life lacks drama, and therefore we constantly have to be seeking artificial ways to dress it up. Rather, what happens in cathedrals – in our liturgical celebrations, our faith formation programs, our schools and clinics and soup kitchens – is almost always fascinating to those who know it from the inside, because otherwise they wouldn’t bother. The trick is figuring out how to communicate that appeal to the outside world – in other words, how to generate those “a-ha” experiences that touched Aaron Brown in Rome, albeit on a local scale.

Given that, I’d like to close today by encouraging the continuing emergence of “Communications Ministry” as part of the “basic package” in Catholic pastoral life, sort of like CNN and TNT come with basic cable. I know many of you are already well underway, and I want to urge you to build upon what’s been done and to go deeper. I believe cathedrals in particular, since you are the showcase parishes in our dioceses, should consider communications an essential component of pastoral activity, on a par in terms of emphasis and resources with youth ministry, liturgical ministry, and so on. I am not necessarily proposing the creation of new committees or hiring new personnel, though in some cases that might be appropriate. What I am proposing is that communications ought to be at the heart of every pastoral and administrative discussion. The trick is to shift from first deciding what to do, and only then how to communicate it, to making communications part of the thought process about what to do in the first place. The extent to which “x” can be used as an occasion to promote better understanding of the church, both in its local and universal dimensions, ought to be part of the conversation about whether to do “x” in the first place – and equally importantly, perhaps, *how* to do it. Every time you organize a liturgy, launch a

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faith formation program, or serve people in need, the question of how to communicate something of that activity to the outside world ought to be part of your reflection. By the “outside world,” I don’t just mean the press, but all the sectors of civil society present in your local community – academics, social activists, leaders of other faith communities, and so on.

To repeat, our problem is not a lack of material to communicate. I am convinced that every RCIA director in this country, for example, has stories to tell of that remarkable convert whose life is the stuff of a Hollywood screenplay; our social action directors know families whose lives were rescued by a timely intervention of the Church; our principals and teachers can point to kids whose lives were headed in the wrong direction, but who were instead given the chance to flourish in our schools; our confessors and counselors understand more deeply than most what’s churning today in human hearts. Incredible drama, ladies and gentlemen, unfolds in our cathedrals every day; indeed, it would be stunning if this were not the case. Religion is where people bring their deepest fears, their highest hopes, their most intense passions – it’s the Coliseum of the conscience, the arena in which the universal human struggle between sin and redemption, between disgrace and new grace, plays itself out.

We don’t have to manufacture news, in other words, we simply have to be imaginative about communicating the stories we already have before our eyes. The crucial step is becoming intentional about it, hence the urgency of putting “Communications Ministry” on the ecclesiastical map.