

## VERSIONE PROVVISORIA

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To cover the Vatican is a different sort of thing from covering the White House, the Kremlin or Italy. The Vatican is not just a place of international diplomacy and intrigue but, and primarily of course, it is a religious place with a spiritual message. The journalist who covers the Vatican must live in two worlds in a sense: the Catholic world with its language and symbolism and the secular world of the press.

I report for both the Catholic press and the secular press; print and television.  
I will concentrate my remarks on “translating” the Vatican for a secular world.

First, we should understand that journalists have to “sell” their story to their editors and producers; this is part of the reason why we sometimes see inflated headlines – there is always great competition for an individual journalist to make the front page, or even the back one. To convince an editor that your story is worth printing it must be “relevant” to people’s daily lives.

To take one example: it is not enough to tell your editor in New York that the Pope has written an encyclical called, God Is Love and expect him or her to think it is newsworthy. First because he will ask you what an encyclical is, and second because the words God Is Love are too general for him to know how to place in the larger scheme of the world’s news.

With John Paul II, this problem was less evident because the late Pope knew how to provide a “hook” – a powerfully delivered sound bite, a funny gesture or even just a facial expression, got him “on the radar” as we say of editors all over the world. So you could open the story with that particular anecdote and then add – “by the way, he has written an encyclical entitled...”

Pope Benedict as we all know is different. It has been well-noted that he is more of a professor, and doesn’t play to the crowds John Paul II-style.

The way we communicate the Holy Father, by consequence, must be different too. We do not have a sound bite or funny image to work with.

Ironically, however, Pope Benedict is the perfect Pope for our new era of communications. He is the post-TV Pope. Benedict is a Pope for the Internet. The best way to meet him is not in sound bites or images but directly through his talks, which he writes himself in a language that is easy to understand, and posted in full on the Internet, where it is available to anyone and can be meditated on in private. It might be said he prefers it this way.

If this is so, however, it raises the question: are journalists necessary in a Pope Benedict world? I think there is a serious question here for some student to do a thesis on. It has been noted that Pope Benedict did not hire an official spokesman, as Joaquin Navarro-Valls was for John Paul II. Fr. Lombardi, who is the Director of the Press Office and Vatican Radio and CTV, often covers this role for journalists who need a sound bite and it must be said that Fr. Lombardi is always available to us and of great help. The point is however that the Holy Father himself did not deem it necessary to have a direct spokesman. I can only think that this may be because the Pope believes his words speak for themselves. This is true, as I noted above, but the caveat is that the average person must read his words, and not a news story about them. We do not have the time to get into this topic further but I think it an interesting one for reflection – whether journalists help or hinder the message of Pope Benedict.

[Here I may insert some examples from the recent papal trip to the United States]

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When documents are issued by the Vatican, many times they are preceded by a press conference with sometimes five different curial officials who give very long talks filled with what we can all with all due respect, church-speak.

These press conferences are usually counter-productive for the Vatican because instead of elucidating a few important points from the document they give more opportunity for a side comment from a secondary curial official to become the news of the day, and detract from the actual message of the document.

Cardinal John Foley, who for many years during the pontificate of John Paul II was head of the Vatican's department for Social Communications, told me recently in an interview that he had always argued for a straightforward press release to be issued with each document which outlined its important points for journalists. This never happened, he said, because some at the Vatican resisted the idea that they should be the ones to interpret the Pope's words. "Well, someone is going to do it," the Cardinal said. "It might as well be us."

The Cardinal's observation is accurate. The people whose job it is to interpret the Pope's words are we the journalists. It is a huge task.

I remember once a producer at CNN telling me the Golden Rule of TV: "No big words; no names." He offered this advice after I had explained on TV that the Muslim holiday Ashura commemorates the assassination of Mohammed's grandson, Hussein. "Ashura, Mohammed, Hussein," too many names, he said. Commemorates – big word. People will change the channel, he said.

We can laugh at this but it does go some way to explaining things like the uproar over the Pope's comments on Islam at Regensburg. Without getting into the larger picture of those comments it is interesting to note that part of the problem there was the Pope was quoting a Byzantine emperor, Manuel Paleologus II. The secular press, under the No big words – no names theory, simply cut that part out and the words were attributed to the Pope.

Religious language is full of big words that are hard to explain to a secular audience: redemption, salvation, eucharist...and of course Pope Benedict likes very much to quote ancient thinkers, with complicated names, to make his points.

I can imagine that some of what I am saying may seem quite outrageous to you. I assure you however that it is the reality faced by a Vatican journalist every day.

We are not without hope, however. I said Pope Benedict is the Pope for the Internet because his writings are accessible – easy to understand. He comes to journalists' aide with some very direct lines that can be quoted:

From his encyclical *Spe Salvi*, the Pope says, "Perhaps many people reject the faith today simply because they do not find the prospect of eternal life attractive." Or again in the message to the American people in advance of his trip to the US he touched on The Golden Rule: Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. There are many examples in the Pope's writings that journalists *can* use, but it always requires finding that line that your audience, who may not be Catholic, can relate to.

### III. The Curia

There is a general impression amongst the media that Vatican officials do not want to talk to them. Many are most likely afraid of being caught out – with a quote taken out of context or a too frank observation which comes back to haunt them once it is in print.

This fear is doubled when it comes to speaking in front of a camera. Whenever a story breaks, it is always very difficult to find an official who will speak on camera.

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This is why people like myself, John Allen, Fr. Thomas Williams and Fr. John Wauck have jobs – when there is a gap in someone official available to speak, the media will fill it with just about anybody! But the truth is that there are many commentators on television and in the newspapers who do not have the qualifications of the above-mentioned analysts and are used to fill space, or air time.

Since I do not think the basic mentality of staying away from the media is going to change any time soon at the Vatican, seminaries and pontifical universities would do well to train and encourage young people to be, in an unofficial way, the Catholic Church's spokespeople. (I know this is already done, for example, in the communications department at this university.) It is not an easy task to give accurate and insightful soundbites; but this is of secondary importance. The most important thing is to be available – to be open to the request, which will naturally come at the last minute and at an inconvenient time. But this too is evangelization.

### IV. Interior Life

I would finally like to say a word about a topic that is not much addressed in discussion of the work of journalists who cover the Vatican – that is, the interior life.

Pope Benedict has said in relation to the environment that, “the pollution of the outward environment that we are witnessing is only the mirror and the consequence of the pollution of the inward environment, to which we pay too little heed.” (p. 230 *Salt of the Earth*) In Pope Benedict's talks, and indeed in those of John Paul II and in the whole of Catholic theology, the interior life – the life of the soul – is the foundation for all exterior activity.

In a working environment where speed, competition and frenetic activity are the norm, we journalists would do well to pay attention to this aspect of our interior lives. The religious environment in which we work can become routine. We report every day on prayer, justice, goodness but may not show these virtues in our own working lives.

I believe our best articles, or our finest pieces on television are for naught if we have not lived our experience as Vatican journalists with love and appreciation. With kindness towards our colleagues and enthusiasm for our subject. Journalists, known for their cynicism towards the world will laugh at me. But to take responsibility towards our interior life seriously, is to extend our capacities as human beings and as journalists.

You will all know the words of St. Paul in Corinthians: “If I speak with the tongues of men and angels but have not love, I have become sounding brass or a tinkling symbol...” –good words for a journalist to live by.