

VERSIONE PROVVISORIA
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WHAT DOES A BISHOP WANT FROM HIS
COMMUNICATIONS OFFICE?

by Archbishop Barry Hickey, Perth, Australia

This is a very broad question, but if you want a one-word answer, it is “Conversions”. It is not primarily about defending the Church, or giving it an acceptable public face, or dealing diplomatically with scandals. It is ultimately about conversion to Christ. More about that later.

But first, some practical things. The answer depends very much on the size of the office and the environment that it works in, so I will put my diocese in perspective and work from there.

The Archdiocese of Perth in Western Australia covers 471,000 square kilometres – which makes it a bit more than one-and-a-half times the size of Italy. It has a population of 1,422,000, of whom 364,000 are Catholics.

There are 85 metropolitan and 15 country parishes, with 149 diocesan priests and 113 Religious priests. There are two seminaries, one Catholic university, 31 Catholic secondary schools and 79 primary schools.

Perth has one morning daily newspaper and one Sunday paper, with numerous suburban and rural weekly or bi-weekly papers.

There are five Free-to-Air television channels – three of them commercial and two owned by the public broadcaster. All of them are linked to national networks in various degrees. There are also two regional networks and one community channel. There are too many radio stations to count.

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The Archdiocese prints a weekly newspaper, The Record, but its circulation is only 7000. It is run by a lay Board and lay staff but it requires an annual subsidy from the Archdiocese. Six times a year, The Record prints another paper called Discovery which is circulated through the Catholic schools throughout the State in the hope that each family with children at Catholic schools will receive a copy.

In terms of bringing people into the Church, our most successful method is the Rite of Christian Initiation of Adults Programme (RCIA) conducted by lay volunteers in the parishes. Each year at Easter the RCIA Programme brings about 100 adults into the Church. About 20 per cent of our parishes conduct RCIA Programmes each year.

Other people are brought into the Church through direct instruction by priests and through various groups and movements, but the RCIA is the most effective means of transmitting the Faith to those who want it. It is a constant reminder that from the very beginning the Good News of Jesus Christ has been passed on through the friendship and example of faithful Christians.

The Media Office

In that environment, my Communications Office consists of one person, with technical and executive support from another.

The primary purpose of the Communications Office at present is to assist me in my communications with the Catholic media and with the world outside the Church through the media over which the Church has no control.

We need to defend the Church and her teachings whenever they are being misrepresented or attacked in the secular media. These are not uncommon events, not necessarily because of malice, but because most secular journalists these days seem to have no idea about faith or morals and therefore find it easy to misreport the Church's views on them.

Personally they may not be without morals, but they have almost no ability to describe them or even recognize them. This may be because morals were part of their upbringing, but not part of their education. For most, the idea of a moral law is a mystery.

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When responding, we do not attack the paper or the journalist. As the Crucifixion proves, attack is useless. Instead, we take advantage of the situation to present the Church's teaching with clarity and detail. We can't normally expect secular media to devote space to our religious or moral teaching, but when they have an obligation to correct an error, this approach suits them by taking the focus off the error, and it suits us by putting the focus on the truth. This is part of our commitment to conversion.

We also need to find a place in the secular media to express our principles when Parliament or the community at large are debating issues such as abortion, prostitution, embryonic stemcells, euthanasia and other life issues. These principles must be expressed with such clarity that they can be understood and adopted on rational grounds rather than as matters of faith that are beyond the grasp of those who do not have the gift of faith.

There are limits to the Director's brief. We have separate spokespersons for bioethics, education, social justice and other specialist areas. The Director assists the Bishop in matters that he himself deals with.

In order to maintain our credentials for media attention on issues that really matter to us, we must be prepared from time to time to comment for the media on matters that are important to them but not so important to us. These occasions emphasise the difference in approach, with the media tending to report things in terms of conflict while we seek rational explanation. This is the theme of this Conference – communication or controversy. Again, this is, hopefully, an exercise in conversion of attitude for the journalists concerned and for their readers, listeners, or viewers.

The Archbishop, or his Auxiliary, is the spokesman for the Diocese. This is because, for Catholics and non-Catholics alike, the Bishop is the representative of the Church and it is therefore best that they hear from him direct. However, the Communications Officer is authorised to act as a spokesman and does so when the occasion requires.

All media calls are directed to the Communications Officer. He determines what is wanted, does his best to determine why the story is wanted at that time, and tries to establish whether any errors or misunderstandings are in the mind of the local journalist or are contained in the international wire service or other source. He knows the media, knows the Faith, and knows

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many of my attitudes by now, so he drafts a statement and brings it to me when he gets the chance. Nothing goes out in my name without my having cleared it.

When we are originating a story rather than responding to inquiries, it is prepared in advance and either issued at a news conference (a rare event for me) or simply issued to all media and interviews arranged with those who are interested in the subject.

Communication "Ad Gentes"

Part of the mission of the Ordinary is to offer the truth of Christ to the world, not simply to react to what the world says or does.

The most obvious way of communicating with the world, the "gentes", is television – particularly Free-to-Air commercial television which commands most people's attention. It is also least likely to give much time to local religious matters on news and current affairs programmes. Popes and scandals are the big exceptions.

Religious programmes on Church-owned or operated channels usually speak mainly to believers. Free-to-Air TV speaks to everyone, religious or not.

We therefore decided that if we were going to communicate on television we would have to pay for it. Fortunately, someone gave me some money to get started.

Actually, we were pushed into this decision by the young people of the Archdiocese. In May 2005, my Auxiliary and I conducted over several evenings a youth consultation in which we asked young people to tell us what they wanted us, their Bishops, to do. I was repeatedly urged to find some way to appear regularly on television to remind the community about God and the important values that flow from our knowledge of God.

It was shortly after this that my financial benefactor came forward.

Creating an actual TV programme would be too much work and trouble, and the only programme time we could afford to buy was so deep in the dead watches of the night that it wouldn't be worth it.

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So we chose one of the three commercial channels and bought a one-minute advertisement during the first ad break in their six o'clock news each Sunday night for three months. Part of the deal we negotiated was that they would replay the advert several times during the week on afternoon and early morning programmes.

The advertisements consisted entirely of me talking about whatever subject I chose. Sometimes it was specifically religious and sometimes more a social comment on things like drugs, homelessness, the importance of families or fatherhood, and so on.

I'll show you a couple of them shortly.

We started on the first Sunday in August 2005, and the response was so positive that within a short while I had enough money to extend it to Christmas.

We have been doing it ever since in various time slots and in varying frequencies, so that we are not on air every week, but we are not off air so long that people forget us.

Most of our messages are contained in one minute time slots – which means 52 seconds of actual talk time, and that means about 130 words. Occasionally we use 30-second ads.

We adhere to the principle of communication rather than controversy even when the subject is political and controversial. As I have mentioned already, attack is useless, and criticism is just another form of attack. It prevents people from listening to your constructive message.

The reactions

The reactions to our television advertising have been almost totally positive, whether from Catholics or non-Catholics. Happily, our young people were pleased to see me on TV.

I often walk in the CBD or catch buses or trains for short journeys. People who have never met me before, and many of whom identify themselves as not Catholics, have said they have been pleased to see me on TV.

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It has nothing to do with my good looks. They have been pleased to see a Bishop suddenly appear and to hear a quiet, constructive message in a medium where they simply did not expect to hear one.

It is a very useful reminder that people who have little religion, or none at all, nevertheless have a yearning for deeper things than they encounter in the secular world. Sixty-second ads may not convert anyone, but it seems to me that they keep alive in people their unspoken hope that there may be something better. It is a bit like making a crack in the wall so that the heavenly burglar, the Holy Spirit, can force an entry.

Television is a noisy and over-active medium. Both in its content and in the way it presents itself – whether in news, entertainment or advertising – all of its messages are directed to appeal to what the Apostles Peter, James, John and Paul all described as the false self system – that collection of psychological weaknesses and impulses which interfere with our ability to develop our true spiritual self, the image and likeness of God.

The media in general and television in particular use their communication skills to rationalise, justify and even glorify the attractions of the false self.

We can't do a lot to correct that in a one-minute advertisement, but if our ad is quiet, if our message is constructive, and if we carry peace in the way we speak we may just give people a glimpse of the true self and the potential it offers them.

I think this is an important consideration if communicators and bishops are thinking about moving into commercial television.

The point is reinforced by the most interesting reaction we have encountered – the reaction of the TV stations themselves.

Very soon after we started advertising, we had informal approaches from the other commercial channels, and it turned out that it was not just the advertising revenue they were chasing. They wanted to be part of the identification that we were building up with audiences.

This was confirmed by the attitude of the Channel we were using. Having started in August 2005, we extended to Christmas and we were going to stop after a New Year message for

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2006. However, they invited us to create some fresh messages for free transmission during January 2006 while we planned our 2006 programme. They did not formally say so, but it was clear that they sensed a benefit for themselves in having us on air.

There hasn't been any completely free air time since then, but we have had a good deal from them in costs, production costs, and replay spots.

We have not begun our 2008 programme yet, but we are considering a few changes. These might include using more than one Channel, and we are examining the idea of using Children's TV. Advertising costs are relatively low, and we think that if we can get the right messages for children, we will probably have the right messages for their parents and grandparents who may be in the room with them, even if they're not glued to the television.

Evangelization Centre

As I mentioned at the beginning, the purpose of the Communications Office and the communications programme is conversion.

Conversion is also the purpose of an Archbishop.

My job is not to attack people, criticise them or tear them down. My job is to convert them to Christ.

All communication therefore must tend in that direction.

One of the things that has bothered me over the last few years of deliberate public communication is that I don't have anywhere for people to go in order to follow a personal interest in the Faith that may be aroused.

Of course, we have parishes, and I have already mentioned the value of the RCIA Programme in leading adults to the truth and the sacramental life of the Church.

But what do I do with people who want more information, but don't yet want to make formal contact with the Church at parish level?

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The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has an organisation called The Catholic Enquiry Centre. For the best part of 50 years it has advertised in newspapers and magazines, and has distributed packages that spell out the Church's teaching and its religious life – without obligation and without follow-up.

It has been extremely helpful in giving people knowledge and understanding, and in eventually leading people into the Church.

I don't want to duplicate that programme, but I do want to personalise it.

I have therefore decided to create an Evangelization Centre where people can drop in at any time in search of friendship and information about the Church.

I have a space in a school that has recently been amalgamated with another on another site.

I have a priest who will take on the job of running the Centre. He will be free of parish duties and therefore able to devote his time and energy to generating our response to those who respond to our communications.

I have already chosen a name - "Lumen Christi" Centre.

We will install print and visual materials, including those from the Catholic Enquiry Centre, and we will have the equipment for people to watch and listen if they don't want to take things home.

And I see a role for volunteers who can offer friendship and who can pray during quiet times. There is a big difference between a place of prayer and merely a place, and I want visitors to be able to sense that difference when they visit the Evangelization Centre.

The Centre will be identified in our communications and on billboards we will erect.

It isn't up and running yet, but it soon will be and I am looking forward to it. The Communications Director will be heavily involved in its setting up and in its many modes of communication.

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We entrust this venture to the Holy Spirit's guidance.

As you can see, everything is directed towards conversion to Christ.

In Perth, we do not have any doubt that our task is “to preach the Gospel to every creature”, as Christ told his Apostles.

And we do not have any doubt that the Catholic Church is the fullness of Christ's presence here on earth.
