"When to speak and when to stay silent: responding to news in a post-Christian environment"

Address by Dr Austen Ivereigh, Director for Public Affairs of the Archbishop of Westminster, Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor, at the Fifth Professional Seminar for Church communications offices, University of Santa Croce, Rome, 27-19 Apri 2006.

We can all think of leaders in the Church of whom it may be said, as the poet Shelley did of his father, that he had lost the art of communication but not, sadly, the gift of speech; or who fail to heed Abraham Lincoln's advice, that it is "better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt". But silence more often conceals unholy trepidation. Fools for Christ must obey his injunction to set our lamp where it can be seen, to proclaim from the housetops. Countless church documents – and canon law – are emphatic that our boat needs to be in the ebbs and flows of the national conversation: the Church exists not just for the salvation of its members but for the common good of society.

That means being part of the national conversation.

The national conversation is driven by news: that is, what the media detect as important and novel, paradoxical or sensational; what needs to be opened up and discussed.

With the proliferation of websites, blogs and podcasts, that conversation is becoming broader and more diffuse – closer, in many ways, to the origins of modern journalism in the early seventeenth century. In coffee houses and pubs publicans hosted conversations based on information from travellers who recorded what they had seen and heard in log books kept at the end of the bar. The first newspapers appeared when printers began to collect these discussions and information and post them on paper. English politicians began to be aware of what became known as "public opinion". In the eighteenth century two London newspapermen writing under the pen name of Cato introduced the idea that truth should be a defence against libel. At the time, English common law ruled the reverse: that the greater the truth, the greater the libel, since truth did more harm. Cato argued that the people had a right to expose and oppose arbitrary power – in other words, that rulers were accountable to public opinion. He was successful: the idea spread that the press existed to serve the governed, not the governors.

Inside the newspapers of William Randolph Hearst or Joseph Pulitzer in 1920s America, readers might be lured by gossip and sensation, but inside they would be taught how to be American citizens. Democracy and community building remained core values. The role of the media is still umbilically connected to the building up of a commonweal – a *res publica* – through the free exchange of information; it goes hand in hand with a democracy which depends on accountable institutions subject to scrutiny and examination.

The energy at the heart of the journalistic enterprise is the search for truth. This is the moral righteousness which drives journalism, a righteousness which acts in the name of the "public interest". Often this is too blithely assumed, or becomes a justification for what is sensational or intrusive. But the impulse is essentially Christian, and at least since the Second Vatican Council – which was still uneasy with the media age - it is also essentially Catholic. The *communio* theology of the Council implicitly "baptised" this quest for truth and accountability. *Communio* postulates a climate of openness and mutual accountability, not in a legal but in a moral sense. *Communio* does not imply democracy, but it does favour a number of features which we have come to associate with the virtues of pluralist democracies: transparency, trust, swift justice in cases of distress, an ability to admit wrongdoing, etc. The best Catholic press, whether conservative or progressive, have the same motivation, and they are right to be hurt when they are helping to form the Church's own *res publica* only to be accused of sowing disloyalty and division.

But there is another source of journalistic energy, which is especially – and uniquely – characteristic of contemporary society: concern for the victim. Those who live in Christian cultures are not enough aware of just how astonishing is this reversal of values in human history, a reversal which of course began with the Crucifixion and Resurrection but whose anthropological

implications have taken hundreds of years to work through. The victim today occupies the moral high ground in our culture; indeed, the crisis of contemporary culture stems partly from the moral double-bind which this shift presents. Moral indignation at the institution which is blind to victims can produce, of course, victims of its own, and another kind of blindness – as all those who lived through the crisis know very well. But the dynamic behind the crisis was clear: the media search for the righteous victim dovetailed with the journalistic search for truth and accountability.

Church communicators ignore this search for the victim at their peril. The clerical sex abuse crisis can be partly read as a failure by the Church to keep pace with a moral awakening in society to paedophilia and its consequences. The Church always makes a mistake when, out of defensiveness, it fails to spot the concern for the victim; part of our task as communicators is to be on the look out for the new victims which the media is detecting. For what it's worth, I believe treatment of the elderly will be the next wave; and it won't be long before the spotlight is turned on church-run institutions.

This phenomenon is what the Catholic thinker René Girard calls *victimage*, and I want to suggest that as a hermeneutic tool for interpreting the impulse of the contemporary media, it can enable us to respond more effectively.

In Britain, for example, the noticeable shift in attitudes to abortion corresponds well to the moral double-bind of concern for victims. In the 1960s, the woman with the unwanted pregnancy forced into the hands of back-street abortionists was the victim; nowadays, it is increasingly the helpless unborn baby. When, a couple of years ago, remarkable ultrasound pictures of the unborn child were published in newspapers, one could almost feel the sympathy shifting. Concern for the unborn is at least now nearly as great as concern for the struggling mother. The question is therefore determined less and less by a sterile debate between opposing rights – in which somehow baby and mother are regarded as having antithetical interests, and can each claim to be the victim - but has moved onto a more Christian ground: the reality of suffering, whether of the aborted child or the mother faced with an unwanted pregnancy.

In much the same way, nothing did more to shift US public opinion about the Vietnam war than pictures of children scarred by napalm. Until then, US public opinion had been motivated by an ideological obsession with communism. Now, it focussed on human suffering. This is a Gospel dynamic, which is alive in the media.

That is why the Church errs when it resorts to ideological or doctrinal abstractions in responding to media stories, for it allows what is cold and abstract to held up in contrast to the human and the real. This is especially true in bioethics. In Britain there is a constant controversy over the technique known as PGD, or pre-genetic diagnosis, in which test-tube embryos are selected because they have, or don't have, a particular gene in order, for example, to enable, say, a sibling to have access to a particular tissue needed for a particular illness. The news reports always begin with the child suffering because he doesn't have such-and-such a tissue, and his tearful parents desperate to relieve his suffering. In other words, the report always gives pride of place to the victim, before shifting to the experts, among whom is often a Catholic making a sound doctrinal argument but which inevitably looks and sounds callous and cold.

Or take assisted suicide, for which there is growing moral acceptance in Britain (although a recent vote in the House of Lords has prevented it becoming law). The argument for euthanasia stems from concern at suffering – the prospect of dying in extreme pain in the most undignified way, lonely in hospital. If the Church argues that life is sacred and that only God should decide when people should die, it sets up in people's mind the idea that God is cruel and sacrificial – a suspicion that is subconsciously present in many people's minds. They would rather reject such a god than submit to him. But if the Church instead argues that pain and suffering are part of the journey towards death, and that society needs to make greater provision for this – through hospices and the like – it will be much more effective. If it can show that the movement for euthanasia reflects fear of suffering, rather than real concern for the victim, it can help to shift the terms of the

debate; and if it can further show that those who seek assisted suicide are issuing a *cri de coeur* out of despair and depression, then it can help to re-focus the discussion on another kind of suffering.

Working out how to respond to such stories, the media can help the Church always to beware the victim.

I BEGIN WITH THESE points because they can help us to determine when or when not to speak out, and how. To recognise the moral impulse behind stories seems to me the first obligation. Yet too often in the Church people view the media as driven solely by the desire to sell newspapers or secure viewers. Even after the astonishing coverage last year of the papal transition, one still hears people talk about the media as “hostile to the Church”. This defensiveness surely lies behind the tendency in recent years for church communications departments to emulate corporations, hiring “PR experts” whose *raison d’être* is to protect and promote institutional reputations. The experts inevitably speak of “engaging” with the media with “positive” stories. Press releases pour forth full of relentlessly upbeat “good news” which fails the first hurdle of any newsdesk; puny nouns groan under the weight of elaborate adjectives, as if enthusiasm alone can force stories into the media; probing enquiries are met by defensive, legalistic responses.

PR experts too often regard the media as a means of addressing people, an instrument to be manipulated, rather than as a means of genuine dialogue which makes demands of the Church. The impression grows in the public mind – and this includes Catholics – of a defensive institution which does not consider itself accountable to public opinion, which prefers its own abstractions to the genuine anguishes of humanity, and which wishes only to perpetuate an institution’s view of itself. In our age, that is not permissible. Nor is it feasible: where the media finds a paranoid and high-handed institution, it smells hidden victims.

Not only does defensive institutionalism fail to take account of the Christian impulse in journalism, but it overlooks the simple point that many more Catholics read daily newspapers, listen to the radio and watch TV than read Catholic papers or papal encyclicals. The Catholic commonweal and the secular commonweal are not essentially different. When the Church is speaking ‘to the media’ it is also speaking to Catholics. As *Communio et Progressio* - the document on communications which followed the Second Vatican Council - made clear, the building-up of public opinion within the Church is essential (#119); and this depends, says the document, on a “a steady two-way flow of information between the ecclesiastical authorities at all levels and the faithful as individuals and as organised groups” (#120). But it is also essential that the Church maintains “a steady two-way flow” with the non-faithful too, for the Church is in society and exists to serve it.

Church communicators therefore need to have relationships of trust with journalists. Just as you cannot have too many best friends, I find I can have this relationship with no more than a handful of journalists: the religious correspondents of the major newspapers, producers with the BBC religion department, and obviously the editors of the Catholic press. They can expect to find out from me what is on the Cardinal’s mind, what is coming up, what the issues of concern are, what he might be willing to speak out on, and how; they can expect me to give out what I can well in advance, so that they can break news or be first with it; even if I cannot share everything, and will protect what is private, they trust me not to “spin” or conceal or manipulate – which is a different matter from taking advantage of news cycles (using curtain raisers and exclusives in exchange for coverage) which we all do. In return I hear from them about the stories they are working on, where they detect issues the Church needs to face or comment on, which gives me time to get together the Cardinal’s response, if he needs one. News is fast-moving, but it depends greatly on forward planning. A close relationship with journalists is essential for church communicators so that they can be advised early on about forthcoming legislation or which stories are brewing.

In practice, deciding when to speak out depends greatly on knowing in advance what the stories are and what role has been cast for the Church in them. There are newspapers which will ask for comment from the Church because they regard the Church as a moralistic institution; the

tabloids especially want to underpin their indignation with a strong quote from a church leader. But this is to play to an agenda which is not the Church's. I was recently called by a tabloid who wanted a quote from the Cardinal about the fact that noble titles can be "bought for cash" (to simplify the story). But they they do not need the Catholic Church to point out what is self-evidently wrong. The Church's role should rather be to point out what is *not* regarded as self-evidently wrong.

Whenever a request is made for the Cardinal to comment, I always ask what the story is, what drives it, what gap has been detected- much as I used to, when deputy editor of *The Tablet*, when a journalist would call in to pitch a story. Every story has a narrative, and I have to decide, before advising him, where the Cardinal, if he speaks out, would fit into that narrative - what role he would be playing in the debate that a story sets up.

But sometimes a request comes in which it is impossible not to accede to.

Before Easter this year *The Spectator*, a thoughtful conservative weekly, approached church leaders and others to ask them a simple question: 'Do you believe that Jesus physically rose from the dead?' and asked for a few sentences in response. For me, this was what we call in English a "no-brainer"; if an influential publication asks for a straightforward affirmation of the core doctrine of Christian faith from the leader of the Catholic Church in England and Wales, there should be no hesitation. I am glad to say that the Cardinal produced a handsome paragraph in which he boldly proclaimed the faith of the Church. But *The Spectator* had less luck with the place over the river, and indignantly published the exchange with Lambeth Palace staff.

> Thursday. Archishop of Canterbury's assistant: 'He's very busy but I'll see what I can do.' Friday. Archbishop's assistant: 'I'm afraid we don't take part in compare-and-contrast surveys.'
> *The Spectator*: 'But we're not comparing or contrasting anything. Please at least ask him.' Monday. *The Spectator*: 'Any luck with the Archbishop?' Archbishop's assistant: 'Archbishop Rowan said to put him firmly in the "yes" camp. What were the follow-up questions?'
> *The Spectator*: 'No follow-up questions. Just the one about the Resurrection.' Tuesday. Another assistant: 'I'm afraid there won't be a [further] quote from the Archbishop. Sorry to let you know so close to the deadline!'

But sometimes it is more problematic. Our prime minister, Tony Blair, is an Anglican married to a committed Catholic. As was revealed in the Sunday papers a few weeks ago, the Blairs have Mass said for them in their sitting room by a Franciscan priest known in the press as the "Celebrity Converter". The Prime Minister is known to have a great interest in faith and there is not a little speculation that once he steps down he will become a Catholic; in order to avoid that press speculation, for many years the Franciscan entered and left through the basement garden window at the back of 10 Downing St.

Blair is clearly a very religious man. But in one of those classic English compromises on politics and religion designed to ensure an even-tempered, if intellectually unrigorous, truce, the Prime Minister almost never refers to his faith in public.As his director for communications, Alistair Campbell, once famously said: "We don't do God".

But Campbell is no longer at Downing St, and Blair is getting bolder as he nears retirement; earlier this year he gave an interview to a television chat-show host who prodded him on the painful decision to go to war with Iraq. He said, rather more tentatively than I'm summarising him, that ultimately this was a matter of conscience; and that he would be judged by God for his actions. The media went mad: Blair was claiming a sanction higher than the electorate; he was fuelling the clash of civilisations; his argument was no better than a suicide bomber's, and so on.

Naturally I got calls inviting the Cardinal or me, on his behalf, to speak on the matter. My initial reaction was reluctance. One would have to get into the question of the Iraq war, which the Churches on the whole opposed; and then try to explain how conscience works. But mostly I

assumed that after a time there were plenty of people who would point out that it was rather reassuring to have a Prime Minister with a conscience; one who, even if he made wrong decisions, was more likely to have made them for the right reasons than a person who did not pray; and who had at least weighed the matter heavily. There are moments when church leaders need to stay quiet because there are plenty of lay people or priests who can make the case just as well.

But as it happened almost nobody did.

A little later I was talking to a senior member of Government, a practising Christian, who was bitter about the silence from the Churches. It was sad, he said, that when a prime minister puts his head on the block over faith that the Churches had stayed quiet. You mean, I asked, that we 'hung him out to dry'? 'That would be putting it a little strongly,' he said - which is British English for 'yes'.

In retrospect, I think it was a mistake to have said nothing. The claim that public affairs should be religiously neutral is really an attempt to neutralise religion; and if our public servants refuse to be neutralised, we should applaud them.

These are two fairly unusual examples: in one case, the media asking for a statement of doctrinal faith, the other asking for a response to the outrage greeting a politician's expression of religious faith.

What is more common is that the Catholic Church has the right and duty to speak out on matters which touch not only its place in society – its rights as a body – but on issues where public life touches the Gospel. It has a body of moral teaching, it has "policies", it represents a sizeable number of people, and it attempts to influence public policy in its role as a democratic actor, with a vision of the common good. As Pope Benedict said recently in an address in Rome to European politicians, there are non-negotiables, issues concerned with the protection and promotion of the dignity of the person. He listed three: the protection of life in all its stages, from womb to tomb; the family as a union of man and woman based on marriage; and the right of parents to educate their children. These are not confessional matters, he stressed, but "inscribed in human nature itself and therefore common to all humanity".

In speaking out on these issues, the Church is not "interfering" with politics, but defending basic human rights anterior to the state – God's law. Almost everything in the *Compendium of Social Catholic Doctrine*, which I keep constantly beside me, can fit into the first of the Pope's three non-negotiables. An example would be the intervention by Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles against a bill before Congress that would penalise the Church for giving humanitarian assistance to illegal immigrants. Cardinal Mahony said if the bill were made law, he would instruct his priests to disobey it. "Denying aid to a fellow human being violates a law with a higher authority than Congress - the law of God", he wrote in the *New York Times*. That is well said. It is because the Church is obedient to a higher law than that of the state that it has the right to speak out, and in so far as that higher law is being transgressed has the duty to do so.

The corollary of this is that the Church should hesitate to speak out if this higher law is not genuinely at stake. A bishop might feel passionately about an issue, and want his opinion known; but he devalues the currency of the Church's intervention, and the dignity of his office, if he believes that every issue which vexes public opinion requires the Church to express a view. The Archbishop of Westminster, in other words, might speak out on the rights of migrants to a fair wage, but his opinion on the World Cup is best kept private.

BUT WHEN IT IS right to speak out, it is important to do so quickly. Evelyn Waugh's novel Scoop gives a sceptical definition of news as "what a chap who doesn't care much about anything wants to read. And it's only news until he's read it".[1] Issues bubble up into public consciousness; editors are employed to sniff the wind in anticipation of a shift in the direction of the tide. To return to the

[1] Evelyn Waugh, Scoop, p.66.

example of abortion: just before the general election last year, the bishops issued their customary guidelines to voters, the first of which, as usual, was a call for a change in the abortion law. Usually this is ignored; but last year, because of the shift in opinion, this was taken up. The party leaders had given their opinions on the matter in interviews with a women's magazine; the Conservative leader, Michael Howard, had called for a reduction in the legal limit. The Cardinal was asked: "Do you welcome Howard's call?" to which he answered yes. He separately answered another question about the way Catholics vote, pointing out the historical fact that there was a time when Catholics voted *en bloc* for Labour, but that this was no longer true. The next day's headline in *The Times* was: "Cardinal calls for Catholics to reject Labour over abortion" – and this was the major story that day. That was wrong, but the Cardinal was willing to correct it: we toured the TV studios that day, and made clear just what it was that the Church was saying. This in turn led to articles, opinion polls, debates – and lots of coverage. (Partly driving the coverage was an anxiety that British politics not become like that of the US, where abortion divides the parties. The Cardinal was able to reassure people that that is not what we wanted to see; but that it was an issue for Parliament, and therefore should be an election issue. The point is that we "rode the wave", taking advantage of media interest to explain ourselves. Erroneous reporting is an opportunity to communicate, not to throw up our hands in disgust.)

Yet policymakers in the Church often prefer communicators to stay silent until a mature policy has been elaborated, and lengthy documents have been drawn up. But this is to ignore the way news works: an issue on Tuesday has ceased to be an issue by Thursday. The media moves on, and will not be interested in the policy document once it emerges in a year's time. We need to be able to speak quickly and forcefully on issues where the Church's mind is settled. This is especially vital at times of national crisis and emergency. The terrorist attacks of 7 July last year by Islamic bombers were a moment when the nation turned to faith leaders, as well as the Prime Minister, for guidance; they needed to express not only the outrage but help to direct it, urging forgiveness and contrasting, as it were, the false god of terrorism from the true God who was present in the compassion and the emergency services.

It is vital that the Church not just rides tides, but helps to make waves. Church leaders need not just spokespeople but writers who can help those leaders form public opinion in Op Ed pieces in major newspapers. I am glad to have helped the Cardinal publish more than 10 of these: on abortion and euthanasia, on terrorism, on interfaith issues and spiritual humanism, on world poverty, on secularity and faith. Sometimes these articles have helped to generate debate; sometimes not. But they ensure that the Cardinal, speaking for the Church, is an opinion-former, willing to discuss and to be part of the national conversation. The very fact that he is present in newspapers in this way – as well as appearing intermittently on the leading opinion-forming morning BBC radio programme, "Today" – show that both he, and the Church, have the humility and the confidence to suggest, persuade and propose, to have opposing opinions put to him, to be probed and tested, and to be willing to put aside the pulpit in favour of the idiom of the media, which prefers the personal to the abstract, the human to the institutional, and dialogue, however superficial, over monologue. Authority in the media age is only established by its willingness to be accountable; paradoxically, therefore, the Church's authority is upheld and established by its willingness to take its place in the public square.

It is too easy to confuse the Good News – capital letters – with the "positive news" beloved of PR experts. If church communicators have an objective, it cannot be to convert to the Gospel; that can only happen at a personal level, as people are drawn into a particular church community. At its best, effective church communication *clears obstacles* to evangelisation: it makes the paths straight by giving an insight into Catholic thinking and values; it helps to form public opinion through clear and compassionate argument; it clears misunderstandings and misperceptions; it shows the Church as responsive, aware, and wise. It generates interest and excitement by challenging public perception.

Speaking out, therefore, is necessary whenever the higher law of God is at stake, whenever the Church is being misconstrued. But we need to pay attention, always, to the moral impulse behind stories, and make sure that the Church has not been cast a role that is being imposed on it by another agenda. Above all, we need to beware the victim, and never put the institution, or abstract doctrine, above or outside human suffering. Like Opus Dei's admirable response to the Da Vinci Code, the Church should not pour scorn on ignorance or gullibility, but attempt to meet the curiosity by presenting the truth as more interesting than myth. In a post-Christian society, in which the national conversation is driven by news, these are the imperatives which should lead us to speak out: not because we wish to use the media for our own ends, but because, like the Church, the media exist to serve the common good. It is our task to help them fulfill that mission -- at the same time as being faithful to ours.

**VERSIONE PROVVISORIA
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