

Is the Church relevant in today's debates? Introduction by Cindy Wooden, Catholic News Service

In my opinion, the overall question posed for our discussion this morning is actually the wrong question. Obviously, church leaders, church communicators, religion writers and a good portion of the world's 1.1 billion Catholics would say, "Yes, of course, the church is relevant." The real questions that arise are: How can the church get journalists to acknowledge the relevance of its teachings in modern social, political, economic and moral debates? And how can journalists get church leaders to stop complaining long enough about media coverage of the church to get them the information they need when they need it!

Fortunately, those questions are the focus of our two speakers.

Clearly the media sometimes thinks something "churchy" is news when the church would disagree: just look at all the fuss made over Pope Benedict's wardrobe choices, particularly his decision just before Christmas to wear the furry, red and white camauro. It was unusual, it was seasonal and there were plenty of photographs. In a similar vein, in terms of the secular media picking up Catholic News Service stories, so far this year the most popular was a report that Vatican Radio employees gave Pope Benedict an iPod.

While English-language Catholic newspapers and Internet surfers did not ignore those stories, they also gave serious attention to articles about Pope Benedict's encyclical, "Deus Caritas Est," to interviews with Catholic athletes discussing their faith during the Olympics in Turin and to comments from theologians and the pope about Judas in the wake of the National Geographic Society's publication of the "Gospel of Judas." Of course, the secular media also recognized the relevance of the encyclical and the Judas text.

I think you will find the contributions of Austen Ivereigh and Marco Tosatti to be well-reasoned, clearly drawn from real life experience and, therefore, very practical in your work. But as a professional journalist working for a Catholic news agency, I would like to raise a small point regarding the relevance of the church's voice.

A clear, well-articulated position on a hotly debated topic is useful to the media and consoling to many church members. But could the church also be relevant in acknowledging a diversity of opinions, especially on new moral questions and political responsibilities? After all, these are questions people of good will and great intelligence struggle with. Yes, many people look for truth and guidance from the church, but many others are all too ready to assume the church is out of touch with the real, messy world they live in. Is it possible that raising questions, pointing out the conflicting values at play and actually showing how people of faith grapple with the issues can be more relevant than appearing to hand down an answer?

Providing accurate information on relevant issues is the goal of both journalists and communications officers, although sometimes you might have to work hard to convince one that that is true of the other. I am pleased to have the opportunity to introduce a professional from each side to present his reflections on the how the church decides what issues to address and how to deal with the media and, on the other hand, how the media approaches the church.

<p>VERSIONE PROVVISORIA IN ATTESA DELLA PUBBLICAZIONE DEGLI ATTI</p>
