

Religion coverage in the secular media

Dott.ssa Patricia Thomas
Associated Press Television News, Rome bureau

SUMMARY

When we talk about covering the church in Italy, mostly that means the Vatican. Covering the Vatican is difficult, because of the Vatican's unique culture. Like any news beat, one has to learn how to work the system, to know how to get cellphone numbers for Cardinals, when you need to use "Your Eminence", when to insist and when to let it go. Over the years, we at AP Television News have improved dramatically. Certainly, technological changes such as the internet, email, and satellite television have helped us get information faster and expand our coverage of the Church.

However, there is always room for improvement. In order to make our coverage better, we could use help from the Church communications' offices. Perhaps we could offer a few suggestions to help the Church help the secular media, particularly television media.

Important issues for the secular media, particularly television, covering the church include the following: First, finding an official "voice" or person that will explain the church's position on a wide range of issues. Second, Getting the Vatican and other Catholic church groups to respond and react to important current news events and stories that might not be directly related to the church, but on which many people would be interested in hearing the church's position. Third, it is useful for us when the church—including the Vatican, local church offices, and church groups – speaks openly and directly with us expressing their position on controversial social issues that can range from gay marriage to female priests. Fourth, television is a very visual media and our coverage is automatically improved and increased with elements that are more visual. At the Vatican such colourful events as a Consistory, or costumes such as the Swiss Guards tend to make excellent television. Fifth, individuals make news. The main individual that we focus on when covering the Catholic church is the Pope, but there are so many other important personalities and individuals that make great news stories, just think of Mother Teresa, to give one example.

To conclude, "Is it Possible to Communicate the Essentials of the Faith." Yes, but you have to work with us, understand our form of media. With the right approach to the secular media, your news will reach millions of people around the globe.

INTRODUCTION

Maria Grazia has explained the importance of live coverage and how we prepare our edited reports. I want to take a few minutes to explain how we get our news about the church, and how we make daily news coverage decisions.

When we talk about covering the church, mostly in Rome that means the Vatican. Obviously we need to have contacts with Catholic groups in and around the Vatican, Opus Dei, Sant'Egidio, the Jesuits, the Franciscans, but most of our news reports in Rome are related to the Pope and the Vatican.

Covering the Vatican is difficult, especially for women, for non-Catholics and non-Italians. Like any news beat, one has to learn how to work the system, to know how to get cell-phone numbers for Cardinals, when you need to use “Your Eminence”, when to insist and when to let it go.

One of my favorite stories that I tell people who ask me about covering the Vatican is my first interview inside the Vatican where I interviewed a priest who has now become a powerful bishop. We were sitting at a table in a sparsely furnished room. The whole interview he looked either at the ceiling or at the corner of the table, but never at me. I became rather irritated and thought there might be something wrong. In the end I learned about something called “custody of the eyes”. According to the “Encyclopedia of Catholicism”, it is “the practice of diverting one’s gaze to protect the imagination...from sights that might tempt one to greed, lust or idle curiosity.” It would have helped me as a journalist if I had known this ahead of time.

I also enjoy telling the story of my first one-on-one interview with a Cardinal at the Vatican, I worked myself into a tizzy over how I should address him – should I use “your Eminence”, and should I kiss his ring? I wondered if I was going to ruin my chances of getting any information by not kissing his ring. While I was fretting, in marched the Cardinal, hand outstretched, “I’m Cardinal O’Connor, how ya’ doin?” I had forgotten he was from New York City.

The Vatican’s unique culture can make covering the church and the Vatican complicated, especially when it comes to personal relations. However, the arrival of Internet, has made our job much easier. The Vatican’s Daily bulletin is on the Internet, and if there is a statement or communiqué by the Papal Spokesman, Joaquim Navarro-Valls out of the Vatican Press Office hours, they send us an email message. The Associated Press wire service claims it was the first international news agency to announce the news of the Pope’s death after our colleague Nicole Winfield received the official confirmation on her Blackberry. By email we receive Vatican Information Service (VISEN), an English language summary of the daily events at the Vatican, from Vatican Radio we receive the SEDOC, a list of the week’s activities at the Vatican, and various groups within the Catholic Church send us their newsletters by email.

I. A VOICE FOR THE CHURCH

One of the most serious problems in covering the church is getting an official “voice” to explain the church’s position. It is fundamental in television news coverage that you have a person willing to stand in front of a camera and explain, clearly and concisely, the church’s position. It sounds easy, but it is not.

Joaquim Navarro-Valls is the official Vatican spokesman, but he cannot be available every time we need to do a news report. It is also extremely difficult to get Cardinals and other top Vatican officials to speak on camera. When church offices make available spokesmen/women to explain the church’s position, they find that they are usually satisfied with our news coverage.

Let me say that two groups in Rome, Sant’Egidio and Opus Dei are very news-friendly, providing us with spokespeople with cell phones that we can reach any time we need a reaction to a church-related news event. For this reason, these groups are likely to receive more news coverage.

II. STORY OF THE DAY

People who work in church press offices might ask themselves how to get the secular media to do more in-depth stories on the Vatican. It might help to keep in mind the following factors that influence our decision-making.

First, there is often, a story of the day. Let me give you a few examples: a terrorist attack in Russia; an election in India; the arrival of the Afghan convert to Christianity in Rome after receiving political asylum. If the church is interested in getting news coverage, it is useful to address the prominent news story of the day. It could be done with a condemnation of the terror attack, compliments to the successful completion of a democratic election (perhaps focusing attention on freedom of religion in that country), or comments on the Afghan convert, particularly in relation to Islam.

To some of you, it may seem a waste of time, providing the media comment on every world event, but I believe it was a frequently used technique by Pope John Paul II himself to spread the church's message.

As an aside I would like to say that it is common knowledge that Pope John Paul II revolutionized the media and the Vatican – CTV, Internet etc. But he also had an incredible instinct for television. Those of us who covered him for television noticed it all the time. From the beginning to the end he knew how to use TV to his advantage.

Who will ever forget his first perfect soundbite as Pope, “se mi sbaglio, mi corrigerete!” Brilliant. US Presidents would pay a fortune to a speechwriter who could come up with a line like that.

He also knew how to use simple gestures. He became famous for kissing the ground when his plane landed in new countries, he could swing his cane to the singing of young people, and he always stopped to greet and caress children.

When Pope John Paul II gave his last Angelus at “Gemelli” hospital, he was unable to speak so he had Mons. Leonardo Sandri read it. The dying Pope appeared at his window with dozens cameras focusing on him, hundreds of journalists were waiting like vultures for him to die, and what were his words? I quote, “In these days of hospital recovery at Gemelli hospital, I feel the presence and the attention of the mass media. Today I would like to extend to them a word of thanks, because it is not without sacrifice that they carry out their much appreciated service, thanks to which the faithful, in every corner of the world, can feel me near to them, and can accompany me with affection and prayer.”

I must admit I am a bit of a softie, but his words brought tears to my eyes. I was shocked. The Pope was speaking to me, he was thanking me. Indeed, I—and my APTN colleagues-- had been virtually camping out at Gemelli for weeks. And yes, I hadn't seen very much of my three young children. But I also was feeling guilty about recording all his pain and agony. But, there it was, the most media-savvy Pope in history said it loud and clearly himself. He appreciated the media attention because it brought the faithful closer to him.

He was not just good with words. Pope John Paul II also knew how to use his silent image. I personally will never forget standing in St. Peter's Square on Easter Sunday last year watching Pope John Paul II struggling to speak, banging his hand on his plexiglass lectern in frustration, his face contorted in pain. He was extremely conscious of what he was doing, that his pain and suffering were being shown to millions.

Throughout the years of covering Pope John Paul II, we learned that we could be pretty sure that he would use the Angelus or the Weekly Audience to make a comment on the Story of the Day. We always had to be sure we had access to the video and were paying attention.

After a year with Pope Benedict XVI, I think I can say that he is not as concerned with addressing the story of the day. I would say this Pope is more of an erudite intellectual, who focuses on theological themes rather than on political issues. From the beginning he has been concerned about the Christian heritage of Europe. I was surprised the other day by the strength and clarity of his comments on speaking to leaders from the European People's Party. He told them that there are certain principles that are non-negotiable and listed: "Protection of life in all its stages, from the first moment of conception until natural death; recognition and promotion of the natural structure of the family, as a union between a man and a woman based on marriage; ...and the protection of the right of parents to educate their children." This crystal clear presentation of the Church's position brings me to my next subject.

III. LOVE, SEX AND SOCIAL ISSUES

Perhaps Pope Benedict XVI in his own way is media savvy. Perhaps he has understood that people are fascinated by love, sex, and social issues. They want to think about it, talk about, and hear news reports about it. Pope Benedict XVI surprised us all by making his first encyclical about love. It was theologically interesting and media savvy.

There are endless social issues that are related to the Catholic Church – abortion, birth control, homosexuality, gay marriage, and the role of women. Some issues are particularly controversial, the church abuse scandal in the United States, the church's promotion of sexual abstinence to fight AIDS rather than the use of condoms. It is important that the church does not run and hide. The church needs to explain its position.

I remember a difficult press conference at the Vatican in March 21, 2002 on the sexual abuse crisis in the United States when a Cardinal seemed to dodge questions and throw out accusations at others rather than address some very important and pressing issues. It appeared to most of us at the press conference as though the Cardinal was defending priests who abused children, and was not concerned about the victims of sexual abuse.

So, how can you get out the church's position? Let's take an extremely controversial issue, one that I have already mentioned, recommending sexual abstinence instead of the use of condoms in Africa where AIDS is rampant. I heard a fascinating lecture once by a well-known American Vaticanista, John Allen. He acknowledged right at the beginning of the lecture the controversy over condoms and how many people feel angry with the Catholic Church over the church's position on condoms and AIDS. After acknowledging the controversy, Allen said, "now let me put that aside and tell you what the church is doing for people with HIV in Africa." He proceeded with a fascinating lecture with amazing details and stories of Catholic priests and nuns living in the most difficult situations who are on the front-line of the battle to save children and adults with HIV.

On most issues the church's positions are very clear. You must engage with us, even on difficult subjects. Find and train people who can communicate clearly and simply. Give us someone who will clarify the church's positions. Preferably someone charismatic. Speak up and address the issue.

IV. COLOR

Television is visual. The more visually interesting and colorful the better. There is nothing better than a Consistory with a hat ceremony followed by a ring mass for television. Swiss Guards make great television.

Maria Grazia has already mentioned this, but the final days in the life of Pope John Paul II, the period between the death and the funeral, the funeral ceremony and the Conclave, all made fantastic television. I can't even remember how many television crews we had in and around St. Peter's Square, around the clock last April. We covered people singing and praying as they watched the window of the dying Pope. We covered the hundreds of thousands of people who stood in line for hours to pay their last respects either with a quick prayer or a picture with the cell-phone. We covered the funeral ceremony from every angle. Who will forget the shot of the book of gospels blowing closed in the wind as it lay on the wooden coffin? We covered Cardinals and Cardinals and Cardinals. Every time a Cardinal left his residence he could usually expect one of APTN's TV crews waiting for him. I remember waiting outside Cardinal Josef Ratzinger's door a few days before the conclave and saying, "Buon Giorno Eminenza," when he came out. "Buon Giorno", he answered smiling. I had no idea he would soon be Pope. I wonder if he did. At any rate, Cardinals dressed in red make good television.

If the church would like to get more stories covered by the secular television media, church media offices need to think about how to make it visually interesting.

One last little aside on color, there has been an enormous fascination in the press with some of Pope Benedict XVI's choice of clothing. The deep red velvet cape with ermine lining and matching hat. There has also been a lot of talk about whether he wears Prada or Serengeti sunglasses. We all had a laugh over the new Pope appearing on the "loggia delle Benedizioni" on April 19th in his new white robes with a black turtleneck underneath. It may seem terribly surface, but these are the things that get noticed on TV.

V. PERSONALITY

People are fascinated by individuals. Personalities make good news stories. I have spoken at length about Pope John Paul II and his natural charisma. He was great on TV. But there are many others both good and bad for the church. How about the famous African Bishop Emmanuel Milingo? What better news than a charismatic, demon chasing, exorcising bishop who decides to get married. A small nightmare for the Vatican, but an irresistible television story. But don't despair. Let me give you some positive examples from the last Consistory. I found the new Cardinal from Hong Kong, Joseph Zen, to be fascinating, and his passion and energy come through the TV screen.

Then there is Cardinal Sean O'Malley, the Capuchin Friar, who usually wears a brown frock with sandals and a rope belt. Well, he was making jokes about going hunting with US President Dick Cheney in his new red cardinal robes so he wouldn't get shot. And one-liners about wearing red socks to show his support for the famed Boston baseball team. Fantastic for television.

So, remember when you are trying to get out your message, people and personalities make a good news story.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

I would like to conclude with a brief summary and a few more suggestions.

1) Be open and honest— present your position in a clear, convincing manner.

2) Keep the message simple – Don't ever worry about talking down to us or our audience. Associated Press is an international news agency. We may be covering the Venice film festival one day, Italian politics the next, and the Vatican the third.

Our reports go from the Philippines to Argentina, South Africa to Norway. Keep in mind our audience is probably not well-versed in theology. You will not impress us by making it complicated; you will just lose us and our audience. If we need more information, more details, do not worry, we will not be shy about asking.

And to repeat my earlier comments:

3) Provide us with talking heads—spokespeople willing to address the issues.

4) Address the story/issue of the day—we will be covering it anyway, and it is a way to emphasize the church position on a broad range of issues.

5) Remember that stories that are visually colorful and stories with strong personalities work well for television.

Finally, returning to the topic of this presentation, “Is it possible to communicate the essentials of the Faith?. My answer is “yes”, but you have to work with us, understand our form of media. If you follow the suggestions I have given you, you will find your news is reaching millions of people around the world.

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