

Catholic presence in Russian media: lost chances and promising future

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Dear colleagues,

My short speech presumes that you, as professionals, would like to know what really happens in Russia, you need a picture, may be not very much detailed, but honest and true. That is why I am switching off the “political correctness” that I have to keep in many cases as a spokesman. I am not intended to offend anybody, any structure or any institution, I am trying to provide a clear picture for your better understanding – that’s all.

Sometimes, and may be often, speaking about professional things, we are narrowing our perspective, thinking that “by default” our basics, our origins and our goals are very clear.

Analyzing the information activity of the Catholic Church for last 15 years (the structures have been restored in 1991 after 70 years of the persecutions of the Church), one could easily doubt several basic things that seem for us axiomatically clear. The more I work in this field the more actual becomes the need in proper clarification.

The questions I am going to put are not a fruit of abstract “mind game” of academic scholars – it is real concern of my colleagues – journalists from secular media. They ask me as a spokesman and wait for my answers. I really have a temptation to avoid these radical questions, or to hide myself behind the curtain of the “extreme complexity of the situation”, or, finally, send the colleagues to the director of Sala Stampa Dr. Navarro-Valls...

But what is inconvenient to “portavoce” could be very useful for our seminar. So, please, listen these radical questions about the mission, rights and duties of the Catholic Church in Russia attentively and try to reply according to your understanding.

- Does the Catholic Church have right to proclaim the Gospel in Russia? Should she do this?
- Does the Catholic Church in Russia have right to evaluate social life (politics, economy, culture, etc) publicly and according to her teaching? Should she be outspoken?
- Does the Catholic Church have right to evangelize, baptize and accept ethnically Russian people? Should she do this?
- Does Catholic Church have right to use mass media to proclaim the the Gospel in Russia? Should she develop them?
- Does the Catholic Church have equal rights with other religions in Russia? Should she demand the equality?

I am sure that the right answer for all questions is “yes”. And from this point of view Catholic information services’ “achievements” in Russia are very poor.

Let us have a brief look at them.

Russian Catholics: history and present day

Catholic communities in Russia are known since XIII c. Until the beginning of XX c. (till 1905) conversions of ethnical Russians into Catholicism have been punished according to the law. So mostly Polish, Germans, Lithuanians, Latvians, Ukranians were allowed to be “legal” Catholics in Russian Empire.

After a dark night of Communism with thousands of martyrs only during so-called “perestroyka” the Pope John Paul II had restored Catholic structures (Apostolic Administratures – 1991, dioceses – 2002).

Now there are about 600.000 Catholics in Russia, what is less than 1 percent of today’s population of the country. We have 4 dioceses, 4 bishops, 250 parishes (+ about 50 more to be registered), about 250 priests and 300 nuns.

Catholic media landscape

We have the only one national-wide weekly “Svet Evangelia” (“The light of the Gospel” - Moscow), several magazines, two radio stations, one TV-producing center “Kana” (Novosibirsk), several publishing houses.

No news agency, no web-portal, no press-service.

The Information center of Bishops’ Conference is more virtual, than real: no office, no budget. It is editorial team of the weekly newspaper that on voluntary base does what normally is the task of the Information center: produces press-releases, monitoring of secular media for bishops and other Church institutions, organizes press-conferences, replies to requests of journalists etc.

No Commissions for Social Communication both on the level of Bishops’ Conference and the level of dioceses (what seems to be necessary since “Inter Mirifica”). On both levels – national and local – no pastoral plans on mass-media (each seminarian knows that it is more than likely since “Communio et Progressio”).

No Ecclesial advisers in Catholic newspaper and some magazines.

No proper celebration of the World Communications Day (with Holy Masses, intentions, collections, welcoming secular colleagues).

No systematical work with journalists – just some rare meetings. No active initiatives – just passive responds on journalists’ requests.

And – despite of all this – we still have very positive image of the Catholic Church in public opinion, still have interest from media (not very deep, but permanently strong), still have friendly relations with journalists.

What are the reasons?

The very first explanation that comes to my mind is very “prosaic”: Catholic community in Russia is very poor, it is not self-sustainable, it almost totally depends on external support. Yes, it is true, we do not have among us “oligarchs” and sponsors, like Mr. Abramovich or Mr. Berezovski, and most of our parishes are not able even to feed their priests – so we can not count on internal support of Catholic information structures. This reason is very important for the explanation of our poor situation. But it is not the only one.

And – I would insist – not the most important one.

“External” reasons

Analyzing the external context of Catholic media in Russia, we can find many really positive aspects: deep respect to the Church and especially the Pope as a moral authority in the public opinion; spiritual hunger for Good News in the souls of people after the decades of “atheistic propaganda”, friendly and warm attitude of secular media.

Government regulation in religion field in Russia is rather neutral, than suppressive: we have liberal law, but sometimes violent implementation of it (it depends very much on concrete situation). Our weakest point is not media – but the foreign priests (about 90% of all) and their visas. Until we do not have local priests it is very easy to paralyze sacramental life of Catholics – to expel the priests.

Among more important negative aspects I would mention wide-spread ethnical approach to faith (Russian=Orthodox, Chechen=Muslim, Kalmyk=Buddhist, etc.) and still very formal

understanding of Christianity – people think it is normal to come to the Church once or twice a year (there is no surprise after 70 years of oppression).

But the most important external reason of our poor situation is rooted in tensions with Russian Orthodox Church. It is a long story with two key words, which are very important to understand: so-called “canonic territory” and “proselytism”.

For last 15 years Catholic community in Russia is being accused in violating Russian Orthodox Church “canonic territory” (geographically more or less it is former Soviet Union territory) – proclaiming the Gospel by Catholics in any form (including mass media) is considered to be “unfriendly”.

Since all ethnical Russians are considered to be “with Orthodox cultural roots”, any case of accepting any Russian to the Catholic Church is considered to be act of “proselytism”.

In this point I must strongly underline that the Catholic Teaching provides us with different understanding of terms “proselytism” and “canonic territory” (The president of the Pontifical Council for Christian unity Cardinal Walter Kasper explained them very clearly in his brilliant article, published in “Civiltà Cattolica” in 2002).

“Internal” reasons

External tensions with Russian Orthodox Church and **our strong** will to improve them as soon as possible (and – as it seems to me – almost for any price) provoked in early 1990-s internal “self-censorship” inside our Church. It has been implemented in many unpublished warnings and concerns and finally led to the document of the Commission “Pro Russia” on general principles and practical norms of evangelization and ecumenical initiatives of Catholic Church in Russia and former USSR countries (issued in 1992).

This document, unfortunately, is not well-known in the West, but it is the key text for understanding the core of relations between Russian Orthodox and Catholic Churches.

According to this document, Catholic bishops and priests are obliged to inform the Orthodox Church about all their initiatives (pastoral, charitable, social, mass-media, etc). But words “should inform about” our Orthodox brothers are intended to understand as “should ask for permission”. And, according to my own experience, this sense had become the real meaning of the “Pro Russia” document. Almost all the critical points in the relations were caused by this difference of understanding – Catholics informed, but it was not enough...

Permanent accusations on “proselytism” have lead to reducing the number and scale of Catholic initiatives in Russia, especially in mass-media field. 12 years ago I wrote an article, entitled “Proselitophobia” – it was very sad “diagnosis” to the situation in small Russian town. Several priests of very respected world-wide congregation, invited by the Ministry of education, came there to teach students. When local Catholics, which had not seen priests for decades, asked them to celebrate the Mass in this small town, priests refused, explaining, that this Mass could be considered as a “proselytizing activity”. This is real “proselitophobia” – and a very good picture for understanding Russian reality.

Many years of underground evangelization and catechization in Soviet Union and “proselitophobia” in new times strengthen a lot so-called “conspirative” mentality, which have already caused very negative consequences. Priests and old people with “conspirative” mentality are convinced that it is better rather to hide things then to make them public. Any things – positive or negative. “The less they know about us, the better it is for our future” – this is the principle, and it is very strong.

Such a “conspiracy” is not understandable for journalists. Some of them even call our community in Russia “Catholic ghetto”, and it is very difficult to convince them, that they faced just several cases, not systematical principal of our life.

The roots of optimism

In the situation of urgent need in re-evangelization and proper catechization in Russia some negative internal reasons I have listed above give me a sad opportunity to call last 15 years in Russia the time of “lost chances”.

But there is promising light in the end of this long dark tunnel. Beside my faith, there are several strong rational and even pragmatic “pillars” for my optimism:

- more and more decision-makers in the Vatican, in religious orders and congregations, in charity foundations and even among media-sponsors have better understanding of what is happening in Russia – so we have chance to see “green light” of semaphore for intensive Catholic media development very soon;
- more and more colleagues both from Catholic and secular publications are coming to Russia with open eyes and honest heart to provide their audience with correct picture – so it promises better understanding; we have a privilege to receive in Moscow 18-25 June the General Assembly of International Catholic Union of the Press (UCIP);
- more and more people in Russia, especially among “intelligencia” - are interested in values of the “culture of life” and “civilization of love” - so we have a duty to make them clearly presented and available for everybody, we should be ready to respond to this hunger....

But, frankly speaking, it would be nice to speed up a little bit this promising future – not only with our prayers, but also with some practical steps.

It would be very useful, for example, if the Pontifical Council for Social Communications could remind to Russian Bishops’ during their “ad limina” visit about their responsibilities towards Catholic media (establishing Commissions, development pastoral plans, etc).

We would be grateful to Catholics in the West for their solidarity and – what is very important in poor Russia – subsidiarity (supporting at least institutional – national and diocesan – Catholic media).

And we already are grateful to some agencies – Zenit, SIR, Asianews, Vatican Radio and others - for their initiatives of closer collaboration, to the Council of European Episcopal Conferences – for annual meeting of spokespersons, and – last but not least – to the organizers of this Seminar for the opportunity to speak.

I hope you finally understood, that it is senseless to look for Catholic newspapers in Russian news stands, to expect Catholic programs on TV, to surf the Internet in hope to find quality and up-to-date web-portal about Catholic faith, tradition, heritage...

That is why the main goal of our Information office – to promote Catholic presence in secular media, to help journalists with correct and positive coverage of Catholic teaching, culture, identity.

Our goal - to be widely outspoken while we are expected to be silent...

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