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Of sows' ears and silk purses

Joe Feuerherd | Mar. 13, 2009

Treasury Secretary Tim Geithner's plan to save the banks didn't drive the stock market down 400-plus points one day last month because he delivered it with all the choreography of a hostage tape (though he did). No, Geithner was expected to provide specific detail on how the administration was planning to deal with toxic debt held by banks. He did not deliver, and we suffered the consequences.

Marshall McLuhan was wrong: The medium isn't always the message. Sometimes the message really is the message.

Those who play with words for a living -- journalists, politicians, academics and members of the clergy included -- repeat McLuhan's error. Professional communicators see a public figure flop or soar and, given their bias for skilled delivery and presentation, attack or praise the messenger rather than analyze the message.

It's part of the reason President Barack Obama, like Presidents Franklin Roosevelt and Ronald Reagan before him, is viewed so favorably by members of the media. Envy. He's better at communicating than they are (as were Roosevelt and Reagan). The upstart Obama even writes better than most professional scribblers, witness *Dreams From My Father*.

But substance, not skilled delivery from the podium or on the page, always catches up with style. Case in point: Pope Benedict XVI's welcoming of the Lefebvrite bishops, including Holocaust denier Richard Williamson, was not fundamentally a public-relations problem, though some think that is the case.

"If the original announcement in late January had been accompanied by a full explanation of what the pope was doing and why, some people would still have objected," Catholic pundit Philip Lawler wrote in a recent *USA Today* op-ed. "But at least their criticisms would have been productive, because they would have been aimed at the pontiff's real actions and motivations -- to encourage reconciliation within the church -- rather than squandered on a false target."

Lawler's affection for the Holy Father appears to cloud his judgment. A "full explanation" would not have helped because the action -- showing some level of acceptance for a renegade bishop with a long and public record of Holocaust denial and antipathy toward Jews -- is, in fact, inexplicable. It was, and is, unspinnable.

That an imminent détente with the Lefebvrites was unknown to key church players in Rome and elsewhere who might have raised red flags did not signal simply a breakdown in communications. It was a strategy.

A few years back the U.S. bishops produced a brochure to better explain the church's teaching on artificial birth control. The problem this easy-to-read pamphlet would solve, bishop after bishop said, was the laity's lack of

understanding of church teaching on the subject. The idea was, of course, laughable. If there's one thing American Catholic couples know it's that the church condemns most methods of birth control. They are not ignorant of the message. They simply reject it.

Likewise, once the church was forced to acknowledge the scope of the clergy sex-abuse scandal, some notable progress was made. But too often, and ongoing to this day, the problem is viewed in high circles as a "public relations problem," a historical phenomenon, though the reality is that no U.S. bishop has been held truly accountable for treating child rape as a misdemeanor rather than a felony. News cycles ebb and flow, to be sure, but this a millstone that will hang on the church's neck for decades to come.

Style is not everything -- and fancy brochures and skillfully scripted speeches ultimately fall flat unless backed by successful policies. Facts matter.

Obama is a gifted orator, skilled at developing and conveying complex messages to a broad audience. But at some point, maybe sooner rather than later, he will own the problems he inherited. And all the eloquence in the world won't be of much help to him or us if we continue to fight unsuccessful wars, can't produce jobs for the 10, 15 or 20 percent of our neighbors who need them, force families into bankruptcy because of medical bills they can't afford, and don't trust the soundness of the banks that hold the paychecks of those lucky enough to be on a payroll.

That's simply a fact.

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