NATIONAL CATHOLIC REPORTER
Published on *National Catholic Reporter* (http://ncronline.org)

A six-point program for church communications

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 10, 2009 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.
São Paulo, Brazil

tArchbishop Raymundo Damasceno leads the Aparecida archdiocese in Brazil, home to the famed Our Lady of Aparecida sanctuary visited by Pope Benedict XVI in May 2007. A former secretary general of the Brazilian bishops? conference, he is now the President of the Latin American Episcopal Council, or CELAM, which opened its fifth General Conference in Aparecida with the papal visit.

tAll this makes Damasceno a fairly big deal in Latin American Catholicism, even if in person he?s actually fairly short and unassuming.

tDamasceno, 72, spoke today at a seminar on church communications in São Paulo. He ticked off a six-point program for communications which, he said, a Colombian journalist had once offered to CELAM:

1.tOvercome the idea that the means of communications are themselves communication. In other words, building TV networks, radio stations, and web sites is all well and good, but if you don?t have something compelling to say, building new and better ways to say it won?t accomplish much.

2.tStop thinking that modern means of communication are ?secular.? (Damasceno actually used the term ?profane,? but he meant it in the literal sense of being outside the temple.) In other words, TV, the Internet, etc., are not somehow alien to the church. Instead, Damasceno said, quoting the Colombian journalist, they are neutral, and everything depends on how they?re used.

3.tUnderstand that communications and preaching are not the same thing. Preaching is one form of communication, but there also has to be space for providing basic information and responding to questions in a fashion distinct from catechesis or moral exhortation.

4.tUnderstand that every pastoral act is a form of communication. The church is always communicating something about itself to the outside world, even at the level of how people are treated when they have contact with the church.

5.tAccept that effective communication happens between equals. Just as Christ emptied himself to become human, Damasceno said, the church must not presume an attitude of superiority when it?s trying to communicate with the world.

6.tRealize that communications is not the same thing as PR. Ultimately, Damasceno said, the point is not just to project a better image of the church, but rather to share something of Christian life and to help people see their lives and the world from within a Christian frame of reference.

Addressing an audience largely composed of people who handle communications for dioceses, religious orders,

and other Catholic groups, Damasceno said what the church needs is an approach that?s ?clear, informative, consistent and ethical.?

?We must not simply speak in the name of the Lord,? Damasceno said. ?We must also act like the Lord.?

During a brief Q&A session, a Venezuelan asked Damasceno about how to handle church communications in an atmosphere like that in her country, where church/state tensions encourage journalists to highlight conflicts between bishops and the government of Hugo Chavez. (She said Venezuelan newspapers love to write stories suggesting that Cardinal Jorge Urosa Savino of Caracas wants the government to fall, even if he hasn?t actually said that.)

The risk, she said, is that people come to see the church more as a political pressure group than as a primarily spiritual presence in society.

?Venezuela is living through a very particular situation right now,? Damasceno said. ?In that situation, it?s important that we make our identity clear ? we can?t reduce our message solely to political themes.?

In part, Damasceno said, the problem may be that church leaders still need to assimilate the teaching that it?s the laity, not the hierarchy, who should take the lead role in political life. In part, too, Damasceno said, sometimes journalists like to ask bishops political questions hoping precisely to keep church/state tensions boiling, because it?s a good way to sell papers.

In the end, he said, ?the church cannot forget to announce its full social message.?

Source URL (retrieved on *02/14/2016 - 17:59*): http://ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/six-point-program-church-communications