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Vatican abuse summit: Reassessing the media's role

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 8, 2012 NCR Today

ROME -- Throughout the arc of the sexual abuse crisis, Vatican officials have often complained about media sensationalism and bias. In 2002, Colombian Cardinal Dario Castrillon Hoyos famously took a series of questions in English during a press conference, and then snarled that fact alone ?already says something about the problem and gives it an outline.? As recently as 2010, Italian Cardinal Angelo Sodano, the former Secretary of State, appeared to compare media criticism to ?petty gossip.?

tThe tone out of this week?s abuse summit has been strikingly different. If not quite fulsome gratitude, speakers have at least offered an acknowledgment that whatever progress the church has made, has often come as a result of media pressure.

tTo be sure, those concessions have usually been coupled with insistence that church leaders should now get ahead of the curve, rather than waiting for yet another media firestorm. Moreover, trace elements of resentment over perceived media hostility haven?t been entirely absent.

tStill, in comparison to Vatican attitudes on other occasions, one might almost say that the media?s role in the crisis is undergoing a rehabilitation.

tThis week?s symposium, which brings together bishops and religious superiors along with child protection experts, is titled ?Towards Healing and Renewal.? It?s being held at the Jesuit-run Gregorian University, ahead of a May deadline for bishops? conferences around the world to submit their anti-abuse policies for Vatican review.

tOn the gathering?s opening night, American Cardinal William Levada, who heads the Vatican?s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, cited Canada and the United States, Brazil, Great Britain, Ireland, France, Belgium, Germany, South Africa, Australia and New Zealand as nations where Catholic bishops have adopted strong anti-abuse policies.

tYet, Levada said, bishops in those countries often acted only after the media prodded them to do so.

t?In many cases, such response came only in the wake of the revelation of scandalous behavior by priests in the public media,? he said.

tAt another point, Levada said that the ?storm of media reports of sexual abuse ? in late 2001 and 2002? in the American press cajoled the U.S. bishops into adopting their ?Charter for the Protection of Children and Young Adults,? as well as a new set of norms under church law based on the charter, both of which are now seen as global models.

tLevada?s concessions are perhaps especially telling, given that in the past he?s occasionally led the Vatican charge against perceived media bias. In 2010, he lashed out against the *New York Times*, calling its coverage of Pope Benedict?s record ?deficient by any reasonable standard of fairness.?

tFrom another corner of the world, South Africa?s Fr. Desmond Nair told the summit on Tuesday that reports of scandals elsewhere have also galvanized victims in his country to come forward.

t?Each time our local media published and highlighted cases and incidents in other parts of the world, we have faced an emergence of similar cases in our region,? Nair said. ?That which has [and] had been suppressed for such a long time was made easier to face and deal with when the stories of others were heard.?

tIn the course of his presentation, Nair outlined the approach of the South African bishops, who formed a sub-committee to forge anti-abuse policies as early as 1994. Their policies, he said, reflect several priorities:

- The safety and welfare of minors should be the first and paramount consideration following an allegation of child sexual abuse;
- A prompt response should be given to all allegations of child sexual abuse;
- Care should be given to the emotional and spiritual well-being of those who suffered abuse and their families;
- There should be immediate consideration, following a complaint, of child protection issues which arise, including whether the accused priest or religious should continue in ministry during the investigation;
- The rights under natural justice, civil law and canon law of an accused priest or religious should be respected; a appropriate pastoral response to the parish and wider community should be provided, with due regard to the right of privacy of those directly involved, and to the administration of justice;
- Adequate steps should be taken to restore the good name and reputation of a priest or religious who has been wrongly accused of child sexual abuse.

tIn addition, Nair said, the bishops? policies also ?emphasize the duty of the church personnel to report criminal offences to state authorities.?

tDuring remarks to reporters, Nair was asked why the South African bishops have taken such a forward-looking stance, especially in light of the fact that many other conferences in Africa have yet to adopt formal policies on abuse.

tNair said one factor is that there?s a fairly aggressive and independent press culture in South Africa, which has brought cases of abuse to light and thereby induced the bishops to take action.

tTo be sure, the media has not quite received a completely clean bill of health.

Levada, for instance, complained anew that Benedict XVI ?has had to suffer attacks by the media over these past years in various parts of the world, when he should receive the gratitude of us all, in the church and outside it.?

Nonetheless, the overall tone at this gathering vis-à-vis the press has been conciliatory, even quasi-grateful. In light of past experience, that alone seems a transformation worth noting.

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