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

Analysis: The Vatican's 'Next Generation' PR maneuver

John L. Allen Jr. | Jun. 26, 2012

Greg Burke (CNS/Chris Warde-Jones)

ANALYSIS

In the original "Star Trek," Capt. James T. Kirk was both the brilliant tactician and the swashbuckling ladies' man. When "Star Trek: The Next Generation" rolled around, Kirk's character was split in half, with Capt. Jean-Luc Picard as the brains and First Officer Will Riker as the brawn.

In effect, the Vatican has now unveiled a "Next Generation" strategy to address its perceived PR woes.

During the John Paul years, the Vatican had its Kirk on the communications front, someone who combined both external visibility and insider clout. Spanish layman Joaquin Navarro-Valls was a power broker in his own right, with a place at the table when decisions were made and the public face of the institution, second only in terms of visibility to the pope himself.

Under Benedict XVI, the Vatican has limped by on half that formula. Jesuit Fr. Federico Lombardi, the current spokesperson, is endlessly accessible and visible, but he lacks the insider muscle wielded by Navarro-Valls.

The Vatican has finally moved to plug that hole.

On Monday, it announced the hiring of American journalist Greg Burke, a former Rome correspondent for both *Time* magazine and Fox News, as senior communications advisor for the Secretariat of State. He'll work not out of the Vatican Press Office, which is both physically and psychologically distant from the Vatican's real centers of power, but on the third floor of the Apostolic Palace, where the most senior personnel are located.

The idea is that Lombardi will remain the out-front figure while Burke will operate behind the scenes, trying to

ensure that public reaction isn't something the Vatican ponders only after the sausage already has been ground.

"You're shaping the message, you're molding the message, and you're trying to make sure everyone remains on-message," Burke said. "And that's tough."

The hire is probably as close as the Vatican is ever likely to come to admitting that it's in serious PR trouble.

Benedict's papacy has been gripped by a series of perceived meltdowns, including a firestorm of Islamic protest in 2006 after a speech the pope gave that seemed to link Muhammad with violence; a cause célèbre over a Holocaust-denying bishop in 2009; and a still-unresolved controversy over what exactly Benedict was trying to say about condoms and AIDS in a book-length interview in 2010.

All of that, of course, has unfolded while the sexual abuse crisis has exploded across Europe and continued to simmer in the United States.

The latest bout of PR troubles includes a controversial crackdown on a nuns' group in America as well as the almost surreal Vatican leaks scandal, which came to a boil May 25 with the arrest of the pope's butler.

In turning to Burke to put out these fires, the Vatican has tapped someone eerily reminiscent of John Paul's media guru.

Navarro-Valls had previously served as the Rome correspondent for the Spanish daily *ABC* and was elected president of Rome's Foreign Press Association. Burke, too, has serious media credentials. He's a graduate of Columbia University's journalism program whose first job in Rome in the late 1980s was covering the Vatican for the *National Catholic Register*.

Just as Navarro-Valls was popular with other journalists, Burke, too, is well-liked in the Vatican press corps. He's on a first-name basis with virtually everyone who covers the place and can speak to them on background as a colleague and friend.

Also, just as Navarro-Valls is an Opus Dei numerary -- meaning someone who's celibate and lives in an Opus Dei center -- so is Burke. In both cases, their membership in an outfit known for its doctrinal orthodoxy and papal loyalty undoubtedly adds a "seal of approval" that can open Vatican doors.

Burke, 52, said he turned the job down twice before accepting.

"I think if I didn't take it, I would always be wondering if I could have made a difference," he said. "I guess now I'll get to find out."

It remains to be seen how long this "Next Generation" division of labor between Lombardi and Burke may last. For some time, the consensus has been that Lombardi is terribly overworked, running not only the Vatican Press Office but also Vatican Radio and Vatican TV, in addition to serving as a general counselor for the Jesuit order.

Over time, many observers expect that Burke might carry more of the load as a public voice, especially given his long experience in the media spotlight.

However his role may evolve, Burke certainly seems to have his work cut out for him.

"I can't fix everything and I'm no miracle worker," Burke said, "but I think the fact they created this position is a step in the right direction."

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Source URL (retrieved on *09/16/2014 - 13:38*): http://ncronline.org/news/vatican/analysis-vaticans-next-generation-pr-maneuver