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Mahony, the Vatican, and the risks of pushing back

John L. Allen Jr. | Feb. 24, 2013 NCR Today
Conclave 2013

Two recent twists in the unfolding drama of Benedict?s resignation and the election of the next pope raise the age-old question at the heart of any good PR strategy: When is it important to speak up, and when it wiser to put a sock in it?

One sidebar to the papal transition story focuses on a number of cardinals whose participation in the conclave is kicking up dust, a list which includes Cardinal Roger Mahony of Los Angeles.

In the last several days, news stories on Mahony have cited comments he?s made either on his blog or through his Twitter account. On his blog, Mahony has been trying to share his spiritual journey in Lent, especially in the wake of new furor over his handling of sex abuse cases in Los Angeles. On Twitter, he?s been referring to his participation in the upcoming conclave.

It?s hard to say, but one sometimes one has the impression that Mahony is actually fueling some of the negative coverage by offering quotable quotes via social media.

On a different front, Saturday brought an extraordinarily bristling statement from the Vatican?s Secretariat of State, intended to rebut the story about a ?gay lobby? supposedly behind Benedict?s resignation in the Italian press.

The statement complained of ?unverified, unverifiable or completely false news stories,? even suggesting the media is trying to influence the papal election.

It was unique not only because of the rhetorical volume, but because it came from the all-important Secretariat of State, not typically given to commenting on journalistic accounts of anything.

We?ll never know if the ?gay lobby? story might have run out of gas if left to its own devices, because the Vatican statement clearly gave it new life.

Setting aside for a moment the substantive issues raised by these very different situations, there's a purely PR question to be asked: Would it have been better both for Mahony and the Vatican to keep quiet, refusing to swing at a low pitch? Or were they forced to offer an alternative to a critical narrative about them taking shape?

I had this conversation over the weekend, during a quick turn-around trip to the Los Angeles area, with Fr. Dave Heney, the ever-entrepreneurial pastor of St. Paschal Baylon Parish in Thousand Oaks. Heney?s an old media hand himself, not to mention an old friend, and he argued that both Mahony and the Vatican had no choice but to get into the fray.

Just like the ?White House? practices rapid response to make sure its voice is included in the first news cycle on a tough story, he said, these guys had to do the same thing.

I took the opposite position, arguing that by saying things that are ill-timed and, especially in the case of the Vatican?s statement, a little over the top, both Mahony and the Vatican are no longer responding to a news cycle. They?re actually creating one, and not in a good way.

In the end, Fr. Dave and I found common ground on this formula: An effective response to perceived insult or misrepresentation is better than no response, but no response is better than a self-defeating one.

In the days to come, other parties in the church will likely find themselves stung by media coverage or public discussion, and will face the same dilemma: Do I remain silent, thereby allowing a hostile narrative to take shape, or do I strike back, running the risk of giving the story legs?

The right answer will probably vary, but right now one thing seems clear: Graduate seminars in PR could offer both Mahony and the Secretariat of State as examples of the risks you run when you decide to push back.

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