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For world to understand Catholicism, we have to tell our story

John L. Allen Jr. | Nov. 10, 2006 All Things Catholic

In a week in which the Vatican has offered us a hum-dinger instance of a public relations gaffe, this is probably an opportune moment for some reflections on church communications.

The subject is on my mind because in the last week, I've had two occasions to reflect at some length on how the church engages the media. Last Friday, I led the "Ministerium" for the diocese of Forth Worth, Texas, an annual gathering of clergy and lay pastoral workers in the diocese. We spent the whole day together on this subject. Yesterday, I took part in a symposium on religion and the media at the University of South Carolina, following my presentation of the annual "Bernardin Lecture" at the university the night before.

My basic pitch in both instances was the following: Given the enormous potential for misunderstanding when the media covers the church, along with the all-too-frequent incapacity of the institution to tell its own story effectively, the church will never communicate well as long as we think of this as the exclusive responsibility of a small professional class of official spokespersons. Only when all Catholics come to think of themselves as "spokespersons" in their own arenas -- among their friends and neighbors, around water coolers at work, and with respect to their local media -- will the church stand a chance.

By that, I don't mean that every Catholic should become a spin doctor on behalf of the Vatican or the bishops' conference. What I do mean, however, is that beneath a legitimate diversity of opinion on various issues in the church lies a substratum of basic reality about Catholic life and practice, which is often misunderstood or caricatured in the media and in popular perceptions. For example, "the church" is not coterminous with the hierarchy, but many people don't seem to grasp that, so anything done by a lay woman or man simply doesn't register for them as "church" activity. Puncturing that sort of mythology will require the best efforts of the whole community, not just a handful of specially designated *portavoci*.

First, the gaffe.

On Tuesday, Benedict XVI met with the bishops of Switzerland during their *ad limina* visit, the trip to Rome all bishops are required to make every five years. As is routine, the Vatican Press Office distributed the text of the pope's remarks, which was also printed in *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican newspaper. Given that the Swiss Catholic church has a reputation as among the most liberal in the world, it was no great surprise to find that the speech was fairly tough, lamenting among other things the "painful experience of seeing the faithful, and unfortunately at times some priests, placing points of doctrine in discussion."

Later that day, however, the Vatican Press Office flashed an SMS alert to those of us in the press corps indicating that a special "communicato" was in our e-mail box. This is the system used to notify the press of big news (it's how we learned, for example, of the death of John Paul II). This time, the communicato amounted to an embarrassing admission: The text released earlier in the day was in fact a draft prepared for John Paul II in

2005, for an *ad limina* meeting with the Swiss bishops that never happened because of the pope's health, which bore little relationship to what Benedict XVI actually said.

The Vatican later released a transcript of Benedict's actual remarks, delivered in German. In them, the pope chose a much loftier approach, focusing on the need to resist secularism by reemphasizing the centrality of prayer, leading to a renewed "love of God." If the church strives to once again put the living God at the center of its message, he argued, God "will again find men and women who are waiting for Him."

In fact, Benedict covered much of the same ground as the 2005 draft, insisting that it must be the priest or deacon who delivers the homily at Mass, underlining the importance of individual confession (Benedict argued that confession is where Christians step out from behind the collective and make the faith personal), and urging that study of scripture cannot be reduced exclusively to a historical-critical approach. Yet his tone was pastoral and gentle. On the subject of homilies, for example, he said that he understands that when a priest is tired and overworked, and there are eloquent lay preachers available, it just seems to make sense to let others give the homily. Yet, the pope said, the mystery of the Mass forms a unity, and elements of it cannot be "sliced away" without rupturing that unity. On the other hand, Benedict did not issue a new edict, saying instead that "as much as possible" this ought to be the way things are done.

The back-story to what happened is that on Sunday evening, the Secretariat of State sent the 2005 draft up to the papal apartment in preparation for Tuesday's meeting. Hearing nothing, they presumed that Benedict intended to use it, and gave it to the Press Office and *L'Osservatore Romano* for distribution. In fact, however, the reason Benedict never replied with any corrections or amendments is because he decided to set aside the draft altogether. When the mistake became clear, copies of *L'Osservatore Romano* with the unused text had to be withdrawn, and the Press Office found itself in the awkward position of retracting its own bulletin.

If this were the White House, some of us might suspect that all this was on purpose. In the end, the criticisms of the Swiss church that Vatican officials wanted to make are now on the record, but the pope gets to look like a nice guy because he decided to go positive. In fact, however, the only realistic reaction to such a theory is the Italian word *magari* -- if only the Vatican communications operation were that sophisticated! In fact, this is simply a classic instance of the right hand not knowing what the left was doing, an all-too-frequent reality of Vatican life.

Of course the challenges in church communication are much greater than the Vatican's occasional ineptitude. Even if the Vatican, or the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, had the most savvy communications "war room" on earth, misimpressions and mythology about the Catholic church would still abound for a whole cluster of reasons.

For one thing, there is a deep cultural gap between Rome and the United States, which means that even when reporters get the facts right about something the Vatican has said or done, they often get the story wrong. (Different understandings of the force of law are a classic example). Further, most news organizations don't take religion seriously as a news beat, so it's covered part-time, often by people without any special training or background. (In Fort Worth, for example, I'm told that one local religion writer also has the rodeo beat). "News" is generally defined as something new or different ("man bites dog"), so for a 2,000 year-old tradition that prizes continuity, a broad swath of Catholic life will never count as "news" for most media outlets. Further, because conflict is the stuff of drama, news reports rarely focus on instances of harmony or quiet service, another way in which much Catholic life flies below the radar screen. Additionally, because "the church" is usually understood to mean the clerical caste, the vast range of works carried out by laity are at times all but invisible. (I was recently asked by the BBC to recommend someone from the church to interview on the subject of women in Catholicism. Since Mary Ann Glendon, a Harvard law professor and President of the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, happened to be in Rome that week, I passed along her name. The producer's response was, "But

we want someone from the church!")

It would be nice, perhaps, if in the face of those challenges, the pope or the bishops were to ride in on a white steed and straighten things out. The events of this week remind us, however, that this appears radically unlikely to happen. In that light, a significant measure of responsibility has to be shouldered by the rest of us.

If we want the world to understand Catholicism, we have to tell our story -- and by "we," I don't mean a specialized class of experts speaking in our name. I mean all of us, striving to ensure that public conversation about issues in the church is at least based on a grasp of the underlying realities of Catholic life. Otherwise, we will continue to spend our time chasing ghosts and arguing over non-issues -- hardly a prescription for making progress.

The e-mail address for John L. Allen Jr. is **jallen@ncronline.org[1]**

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