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Keeping 5000 Communicators Happy

Media in Rome at the Transition

Permit me to outline how our department tried to keep 5000 communicators happy during April events at the Vatican which were both sad and glorious.

First of all, two things should be noted. I was in the United States – between Philadelphia and Annapolis, Maryland, when Pope John Paul II died – but I was hunted down in both places and did about twenty interviews, including „Meet the Press“. With the death of the Holy Father, I was out of office – and our department had no second-in-command at the time, since the bishop-secretary had been transferred – but our undersecretary, Dr. Angelo Scelzo, who is also the coordinator of what is called the audiovisual section of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, did an excellent job in directing the work of the office during the interregnum – and I returned to Rome to work as a „volunteer“.

Obviously, we had planned for the moment, but we could not admit that we had done so!

First of all, we realized that we could not have communicators coming to our office inside the Vatican, which – by the way – is right next to Domus Sanctae Marthae, the residence of the cardinals during the conclave. Thus, when we realized that there would be crowds of communicators for the silver jubilee of Pope John Paul II and for the beatification of Mother Teresa, we asked permission to take over several rooms on the ground floor of a Vatican-owned building just off St. Peter's Square for our work of accreditation. We used those facilities then and modified them on the basis of that experience – and the work in them was finished just days before Pope John Paul II died.

Even before that we knew that we had to expand and make more professional our facilities for television commentators. As one who has done English-language commentary for twenty-one years, I knew that a TV monitor on a wooden board supported by two saw-horses would not be adequate for a major occasion – and so, for the Great Jubilee of the Year 2000, we convinced the civil authorities of Vatican City State to prepare facilities adequate for fifty commentators, each one with his or her own booth with a monitor and headphones and a light – and with the technical facilities under this type of grandstand facility. When an art exhibit threatened to take over all or part of that area, we successfully did battle to protect the area – and even to have repairs made of the damage caused by the art exhibit in its attempt to expand.

Finally, we recalled the space outside of St. Peter's Square filled with satellite trucks for certain events. While this area was not under Vatican jurisdiction, we - together with the Vatican TV Center - negotiated with the City of Rome, with the Italian state network, RAI, and with the European Broadcast Union to construct a three-storey stand and fibre-optic cables to satisfy about twenty-six different networks and to avoid clutter in the square and to preserve the sight lines for all in attendance. Other networks had already leased local rooftops and hillsides.

What were the results?

In the period between April 1 and 24, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications provided accreditation and assistance to 4843 communicators involved in television, radio and photography. The Press Office of the Holy See provided credentials to about 2500 journalists. Obviously, for the TV people and photographers, we had to guarantee visual access through selected locations and rotating pools.

For the major ceremonies, we also had to inform TV networks of the availability of the images from St. Peter's Basilica and Square - and it was necessary for us to start a web site independent of the official Vatican site which was overwhelmed with inquiries.

Through that web site, we were not only able to keep those in Rome informed but also to make it possible for 155 networks in 84 countries to receive the needed information and texts to bring a live telecast of the funeral of Pope John Paul II to what was certainly one of the largest audiences in the history of television.

Later, we were able to make available the Mass for the Inauguration of the Pastoral Ministry of Pope Benedict XVI to 124 television networks in 75 countries.

Obviously, there were other telecasts from Rome during those historic days - especially the „white smoke“ and the first appearance of Pope Benedict XVI.

All these telecasts were made available to networks around the world through the wonderful Vatican Television Center and through the Italian state broadcaster, RAI.

At this point, I would like to express a word of thanks to the Knights of Columbus who - since the Christmas Midnight Mass of Pope Paul VI in 1974 in which he opened the Holy Year of 1975 - have provided funding for the satellite uplink costs of major papal ceremonies and the downlink costs for nations in the developing world which could not otherwise afford to take the programs.

A number of „firsts“ should be noted - two Israeli channels telecast the funeral of Pope John Paul II with commentary in Hebrew; nine channels in the Palestinian territories telecast the funeral with Arabic com-

mentary reaching all of Israel and Jordan as well; the Republic of Congo (Brazzaville) formerly ruled by a Marxist regime, used a telecast from the Vatican for what we believe was the first time; Greece and Cyprus televised the funeral - with commentary in Greek.

Thus, the ecumenical and interreligious outreach of Pope John Paul II had a profound effect on the coverage of his funeral - and the references of Pope Benedict XVI to his commitment to similar ecumenical and interreligious outreach were providential.

In general, it was a pleasure to work with communicators from throughout the world who wished to provide accurate and indeed reverent coverage from the Vatican during what we have come to call „the events of April“. We are indeed grateful to all of them for their interest, and it was one of the great privileges of our lives to help make possible worldwide participation in the funeral Mass of the extraordinary Pope John Paul II and in the beginning of the pastoral ministry of Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger as Pope Benedict XVI.

It should be noted that the last major document of Pope John Paul II, „Il Rapido Sviluppo“ - „The Rapid Development“ (of communications technologies) - was on the theme of communications, and one of the first audiences given by Pope Benedict XVI was to the communicators who has covered the funeral of Pope John Paul II and his own election and beginning days as Pope.

Please know that your work is known and appreciated on the highest level - and also know that you have helped to make possible one of the proudest moments in the history of the communications media. God bless you all!

(Address by the President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications at the CPA Catholic Academy in Orlando on May 25, 2005)