

Robert A. White,
S.J.

The Church: Image of Christ? Or a Whited Sepulchre?

The relation of the internal and external
communication of the Church¹

The public image of the Church becomes a „scandal“ when there are verified revelations of conduct, especially in its leadership, contrary to its own gospel values and contrary to acceptable norms of conduct in the society. When the serious misconduct of Church leadership and attempts to „cover up“ this misconduct begins to be the subject of public debate, the damage to the credibility of the Church has been done and the best that the Church’s public communication can do is to reduce as much as possible the damage to the Church’s moral leadership toward its own members and to the general public. In these pages I would like to focus, rather, on how these scandals can be prevented in the first place and how the Church can be, by its very existence and everyday conduct, truly a *sacrament*, an outward sign revealing the grace-giving action of Christ.

1. Having an office of „pastoral communication“ which helps to link all the communication of the Catholic community, both internal and external, to the general pastoral goals of each diocese and of the Episcopal conference.

The pastoral goals refer to the way a given diocese as a community chooses to live Gospel values and to build the Kingdom of God in a given cultural context. It is our common „mission statement“ that every single Catholic knows and is committed to carry out.

There ought to be a „public relations“ function which deals with the media, but this should be closely linked with the general communication activities of the Church. It is not possible to separate the „internal“ from the „external“ communications and give the responsibility of creating a public image to one or two people who often don’t really know what is going on within the institutions of the diocese. Every single Catholic has to have a sense of creating the image of the Church by an integral Catholic life. The quality of the public image of the Church depends, to a great extent, on the quality of the internal communication of the Church and on the quality of the *intra-personal* communication of every Catholic of the

¹ Vortrag beim 75-jährigen Jubiläum der UCIP am 6. Dezember 2002 in der Päpstlichen Gregoriana-Universität in Rom.

diocese. Most of the problems of the public image of the Church start when an individual, whether a priest or layman, lives a double life and there is no communication between the professed ideals and the real conduct. Likewise, a scandalous public image begins when there is no real communication, that is, sharing of meaning about our Catholic life, in a parish or diocese. Every diocese should have a diocesan coordinator of communication, working closely with the bishop and diocesan secretariat, and responsible for continually evaluating, as Cardinal Martini states in his pastoral letter „Effata“ the „areas of incommunicability and the quality of the communication at all levels of the diocese, from the intra-personal to the diocesan“.

2. The first step in outlining a policy of communication in a diocese is to define the theological foundations of the communication, both internal and external.

The basic „mission statement“ of the Church’s Communication „Communio et Progressio“ states that the goal of communication is to establish community. Communication is not simply a matter of technology and transport of information, but is essentially an act of love. This is an understanding of communication based on a theology of incarnation and of the trinity. This means that the quality of communication in a diocese is measured not simply in the technology and information flows, but in the quality of community and the relationships of Christian love. This automatically translates into good public relations: they will know that we are Christians because they see that we love one another. If the attitude of loving service penetrates into every part of a personality, then sexual abuse which violates the sense of dignity of a person, in so far as it is a conscious responsible action, is very unlikely to happen.

3. Another important step is to promote a culture of honesty, transparency and open communication at every level of the Church’s internal communication and in the communication of the Church with the public.

At the personal level this means that there are no double standards. There is no dichotomy between what I profess to be by, for example, a clerical status, and what is really my personal thinking and action. Bishops and those who are responsible for the personal spirituality of the clergy privately complain about how difficult it is to get the clergy to

make a serious annual retreat, to have a regular confessor or spiritual director or to take seriously their personal spiritual development - or their personal moral problems. There is no person who does not have weaknesses that can affect their family, professional or other obligations, but if a person can face these disorders honestly and take the steps to handle this, then, like St Paul says, their weaknesses become their strengths. This requires a great deal of humility, honesty and transparency.

In the many courses for diocesan directors I have given over the years, the major problem of communication that emerges are not technical problems but the problems of communication between bishops and priests, among priests, between parish priests and the laity. Much more training for interpersonal communication, participatory group communication and organizational communication would be helpful for reducing needless conflict and enabling the local Church to have greater consensus about its goals and its public image.

It is important to overcome the dichotomy between those who work with the internal communication of the Church and those more responsible with the external, public communication of the Church. Those working in formation of clergy and other Church leadership often cannot imagine that what they do could have an impact on the public image of the Church. Most of the scandals of the Church, however, could have been avoided by a better formation that is aware that personal problems almost always become public image problems in one way or another. Scandalous public controversy between a bishop and a Catholic university could be avoided by awareness that bad internal communication in the Church sooner or later will lead to bad external communication.

It is important to realize that the forms of internal discipline within the Church have been changing radically. Church personnel have far more freedom and less obligatory distancing from the world. This involves much more of a sense of personal and internal responsibility on the part of Church personnel. In fact, the new premises of formation have not been examined in terms of likely public behavior.

Much of the personal misconduct of priests was fully known to superiors but was considered simply an internal problem. A good diocesan communications office, which has a better sense of the explosive nature of many internal discipline problems, should do a systematic study of the potentially damaging internal communication problems and will point out to Church leadership that a given „internal“ problem could easily become a scandalous public image issue.

4. Create the conviction in Church leadership that, in a world where religious symbols have tended to disappear from the public, cultural sphere, an awareness of religious symbols which awaken religious sentiments depends on the Church's efforts to be present in the media, especially in the public, popular broadcasting and print media.

There are far more opportunities to be present in the public media, especially in the local community media, than the Church begins to take advantage of. Issues of education, health, religion and life environment are more important at the local and regional level and there is a more favorable attitude of the media toward religion. Religion has an important civic, public role to play at the local level. Getting access to the public media is the least expensive and least time-consuming media-related activity that the Church can plan. Local media are more open to clergy and other Church-related personnel who are not professional media people, but who have an acceptance in the local community and know the local community well.

If a local diocese encourages Church personnel, in a supervised and coordinated way, to be present in the local media, this quickly multiplies the Church's presence in the lives of people in a much less expensive way. If Church personnel are going to be present in the media, this will require much greater effort to overcome the fear and resistance to the media among priests, religious and lay leadership. It will be useful to introduce training in communication and media use in seminaries and other places of leadership formation, so that all pastoral personnel will be aware that they have a role in creating a public image.

The more the Church's excellent work in local communities and excellent pastoral leadership is made present in the local and regional media, the more the Church will have a general positive image. If people have a better understanding of the Church in general, with a sense of both its weak and strong points, and a general positive attitude toward the Church, then the people of the community are more willing to accept the weaknesses in the Church. If the public sees the Church as an important partner in the building of the local communities, then there will be a willingness to work to make the Church the best partner possible.

Also, if the media are more accustomed to working with the Church and understand the Church better, the media are more likely to treat scandals in a more balanced, intelligent manner.

5. The national and other „big“ media pose a particular challenge for the fair presentation of religion because the decisions are made by people with less roots in a local community, with less interest in religion and more likely with some indifference or even hostility to religion.

Media professionals pride themselves on being objective and fair in dealing with all institutions. At their best, they see themselves as the „Fourth Estate“, the Watch Dog of human liberty and democracy. They are often under intense pressure from politicians, economic titans and virtually every other institution to give „favorable“ publicity. They feel that all institutions are criticizing the media for not giving a „favorable“ representation. They are also under pressure from their managing editors to find „entertaining“ material that will „sell“ newspapers and advertising time. They are aware that they are in competition with colleagues to get „their“ story into the prime time news or into the front page. They want to make it very clear that they are not the instrument of any institution, especially of the Churches. There is a general attitude, especially among professionals in the large commercial media that the people are not interested in religion (read: people who are prime advertising markets, that is, young, better educated, higher income brackets) (Hoover, 1998: 54-55).

There is also considerable data to show that the large commercial media do not have competent journalists who understand religious issues assigned to provide religious coverage. Most large media organizations will assign specialists to economic news or different areas of political news, but those who do religious reporting are often woefully ignorant of what religion is about.

The best research data shows that, in fact, the public is much more interested in religion than the big media thinks, that the public would like more good religious coverage, that the public prefers to get this from the large commercial media sources and that they are not satisfied with the coverage they are presently getting (Hoover, 1998: 123). On the other hand, there is consensus that religion is gradually being taken out of the Sunday, religion page ghetto and into mainstream news and other media genres (Hoover, 1998, 53-54). How has this happened?

Firstly, the churches have become aware that the media are interested in mega events or mega personalities. Many will say that the Catholic Church's Vatican Council started the turn. Then the visits of the Holy Father. In general, the churches have discovered that in order of importance, the following six topics will attract the media:

- Churches taking positions on important issues and making consensus
- pronouncements on issues.
- The churches' discussions of ethical and social issues
- The influence of religion in national politics
- Religion in national politics
- National religious debates and controversies
- Religion in foreign or international politics

It is important to note that virtually all of these topics are of interest to the public and generally to the media because they deal in some way with issues that are part of a general public deliberation. The public and the media are less interested in doctrinal or other issues that may be of only internal interest to a given church. Bishops or other church leaders often complain that the media have not cited what is thought to be the most important.

When the large commercial media treat religion, they are aware that there are generally three types of audiences: the devout adherents, the lukewarm but curious, and the hostile. The treatment will carry some identification with the symbols from the perspective of the devout, with the best of media language for the curious who wish to be entertained and some barbed remarks which a journalist thinks the devout should consider and which will make clear the careful distance from being identified with the subject. The most professional treatment will attempt to present honestly and sympathetically from the insider perspective what each public figure thinks about an issue. The most responsible journalism presents everybody at their very best so that all positions in a pluralistic society will get to know each other and will be able to dialogue with each other.

The days when there was a „gentleman's agreement“ among major institutions and the media to ignore the private immoral or even illegal conduct of personnel of major institutions is long passed. The media do not take up all immoral or illegal activity but only when it involves major public figures, when the immorality occurs in institutions which are supposed to be guardians of morality or when the issue has been a topic of public debate. There has been so much public debate about celibacy, for example, that any controversy about priestly sexual behavior tends to be commented on. Every profession has its own way of handling unprofessional conduct, but since the prestige of the profession depends on the image, the protection of the image will be a major concern. The Church might well consult with other professions in this regard.

A controversy is almost always news and helps a journalist get the story on the front page. If an internal matter has reached the public

controversy stage, journalists will try to dig into it to get more controversy and keep the story going. An internal controversy within the Church usually is not going to help the public much and may not really be good journalism. It is important for the representative of the Church to the media to know what is responsible and to put a damper on the dimensions of conflict, especially when there really is no significant controversy. The gradual „tabloidization“ of the media has greatly blurred the sense of responsible journalism, and institutions such as the church need to be somewhat more aggressive in presenting to press councils and other forums the violations of responsibility.

A media system performs at its best when there is a continuing dialogue between all of the major actors involved with the media and all actors are able to present their moral claims (White, 2000: 52-54). In recent years, the churches have made a concerted effort, not simply to continually criticize the media as somehow inherently evil, but to engage the media in a dialogue in which the moral claims and needs of all are taken into consideration. Gradually, this is beginning to bring some improvement.

6. Gain the respect of the media

The best of the media offices of the Church have been able to understand the pressures of the media and understand what support journalists or other media workers need to have to legitimately carry out their functions.

Journalists, for example, will respect a press office that makes available information that is absolutely complete, accurate, balanced and which responds to the usual questions of the journalist. Journalists expect transparency and honesty, but do understand when something is still under discussion and not ready to be announced. Journalists lose their respect when information is given which is patently false or very improbable.

If the media begin to suspect that an institution wants to hide information, this only doubles the effort of the media to dig into the issue. The media are able to create an issue out of the Church's suspected or real lack of transparency. Often this may simply be incompetence in the communication ability of the Church. This leads to the further accusation of hypocrisy. The sex abuse issue is perhaps a good example of a case where the sex abuse ceased to be the central issue and the transparency and public responsibility of the Church became the prolonged center of attention. A single person's failing is a matter which quickly passes, but the

major reform of the institution which reaches to highest level of the Church's decision making is an issue which can be discussed in the media for years.

It is important for public relations offices of the Church to have good communication relations with the people they represent and that there be complete transparency in the organization.

7. A clear plan of response by the diocese or the Episcopal conference when action on the part of a person of the church or of the Church itself.

As a form of conclusion, I would like to suggest some general guidelines for action when there are about to be revelations in the public media of serious misconduct on the part of a member of the clergy or other diocesan leadership. Often this involves legal violations and diocesan leadership is faced with many enormous problems simultaneously. The crisis becomes multiple: trying to deal with a difficult legal procedure, trying to deal with the public media and the internal diocesan announcements of what is going on, trying to deal with the possible financial liabilities, dealing with the person involved, dealing with the people of the parish and appointments to a vacant parish. Even the most cool and competent diocesan leadership tends to become a bit frantic because there are so many things to be done at once. Sometimes, a smaller diocese may not have the machinery to respond to one or several aspects of this problem. It is widely suggested that every diocese have a plan for „crisis management“. It is also widely suggested that the bishop not be the person to deal with the media, unless it is to make a carefully prepared statement.

What has been dismaying is that in spite of repeated public relations fiascos on the part of some dioceses and some Episcopal conferences, there does not seem to have been much of a progressive learning process. Some of the problems seem to have been perpetrated by highly paid professional public relations agencies.

Such obvious rules of procedure as not publicly opening up a potentially damaging revelation by Church officials or not carrying on a public controversy to defend a point of honor do not seem to be observed.

The general guideline is that when a public revelation of misconduct is certainly to be made, that the diocesan authorities and the person who is the diocesan spokesman should make a thorough investigation of all the facts involved. The credibility of the diocesan leadership must be preserved above all. Otherwise the people of the diocese begin to be completely demoralized. If the Church begins to make statements that are later

proved incomplete or false, then it may be impossible to recover the credibility of the diocesan leadership.

A second guideline is for Church leadership to make the necessary public statement which is satisfying to the media and for the public's need for information, and then, as much as possible, to avoid all further discussion in the matter. The principle involved is that the person and those close to the person should be protected as much as possible. Also the moral authority and credibility for the Church for carrying out its mission must be protected as much as possible. The danger is that the media, once it senses a „good story“, may provoke Church spokespersons into further and further statements. It is important to foresee how the media are likely to handle such an announcement and what it is going to look like when it hits the television or newspaper news. Rarely is it perfectly satisfying for the Church authorities, but it is better to leave the matter as it stands rather than begin a public debate on the matter. The Church almost never wins this prolonged debate. Not infrequently the focus moves from the conduct of the individual to the conduct of the Church as a institution. This awakens all sort of latent prejudices and hostile feelings of individuals or of the culture.

Finally, the people who suffer the most in all of these situations are the ordinary faithful. They struggle hard to maintain the credibility of their own Catholic identity in the midst of an often hostile environment. When serious misconduct of Church leadership is revealed, then feel betrayed and may even feel that all their efforts are being destroyed. At this point, it is important to have a clear pastoral statement on the part of the bishop which deals in general with this sort of event as an event which is part of our Christian life and which our faith must accept. Our people must be helped in a pastoral way to grow in their faith even in difficult moments such as this.

References

- Hoover, Stewart (1998), *Religion in the News: Faith and Journalism in American Public Discourse*. London: Sage Publications.
- White, Robert A. (2000), „New Approaches to Media Ethics: Moral Dialogue, Creating Normative Paradigms, and Public Cultural Truth“, 59–80, in: Bart Pattyn (ed.), *Media Ethics: Opening Social Dialogue*. Leuven: Peeters.