Meeting of Press Officers and Spokespersons

CCEE (Malta, 17/19 June 2019)

# Crisis Management for the Church, today

## Introduction

I have a vivid memory of my first visit to Malta, 13 years ago, to give a talk about Christian formation for adults. Only 10 people showed up. I wanted to catch their goodwill, so I began saying:

—“It is a pleasure to be here in Malta! It reminds me of my grandmother, who used to bring me Maltesers whenever she travelled abroad”.

Nobody laughed. Not even smiled to me. After an embarrassing silence, someone seated in the first row raised his hand and said:

—Maltesers have nothing to do with Malta. Its name comes from the barley malt added to chocolate and biscuit.

Red in face, I decided to start again:

—It is a pleasure to be here in Malta. Period.

## My objectives

I really appreciate the invitation to address such an audience, and the faith organizers put in me entrusting me the first intervention in this Conference for media officers and spokespersons of European Episcopal Conferences. How could I repay this trust? Telling you the truth. And the truth is, there is a clear and present danger that this lecture is completely useless.

Why? Because you are the wrong audience! It had happened to me many times: I address communicators (either business communicators or their Church counterparts, it doesn’t matter), and the conclusion is, “time wasted”. They know it all... and they can’t put it in practice. It is their bosses who should listen to me!

So, what is the point of a session like this?

I would like to suggest and develop three proposals, hoping they could help you as communicators, and have an impact in how the Church in Europe deals with problems, controversies, crises and scandals.

## I. To be a good communicator, we need to be trustworthy

To fulfill our duties as communication officers and spokespersons at our Episcopal Conferences during a crisis, we have to have become trustworthy before the crisis**.**

It easy (and cheap) to blame our pastors for our lack of authority within the Church. That would be true… but fruitless. If we want to advance, we have to find out our areas of improvement and grow.

So, let us ask ourselves: are we trustworthy? Do our bishops consider us reliable? Trust is important in communications, but indispensable in crises. If our bosses don’t think that we deserve trust, our service to the Church will be much less valuable than needed. Instead of telling us about coming storms well ahead, so we can prevent and prepare, they will inform us the last minute… or even worse, we will learn about them in the media.

Trust does not come because we claim for it: it is deserved after a long period of good deeds. Forget about media! Gaining trust should be your first objective. So get ready to go gradually in the ladder of building your trustworthiness.

### First step: don’t think like a communicator

*[Anecdote: WYD 2011 and my auxiliary bishop]*

The first persuasion is towards our bishop. If we can’t persuade him, with whom we share so many things, how could we persuade a New York Times correspondent, a YouTube influencer or a LGTBI activist?

The first goal in our job is to become a “persona di fiducia”. Maybe not “the one” but at least one of his more trusted collaborators. Enter in the conference’s *dominant coalition* through authority, not power.

To do so, we have to have in mind his concerns, his pastoral priorities, his agenda. To think like one of the leaders, like a bishop, not like a professional worried mainly about public opinion.

Only if he sees we row in the same direction, if we don’t have our own agenda but his or the agenda of the conference/diocese he will see us reliable collaborators. Trust grows when our motives are based on mutual benefit, not just for the benefit of our own department.

*So, do we know our institution, its organization, its plans and its people like the back of our hand?*

### Second step: be flexible

*[Anecdote: working for a prudent boss, 2001: “now, let’s wait”.]*

Working for someone who dedicate to communication issues less time than we do, and who usually knows less about them, is a challenge. Quite easy we could become frustrated for his blindness or stubbornness.

Don’t be. Instead, be flexible. Adapt to his priorities. Present your proposals linked to his plans and preferences. Use authorities (documents, quotes, authors) that he considers relevant and sound.

Adaptation includes good timing. If the long-term goal is clear, we have to understand when the right moment is and when it is better to wait. Don’t push in ill times. Not requested proposals are not valuable.

*So, do we have a sense of timing?*

### Third step: don’t be a yes-man

In order to achieve trust, one must always be forthright about one’s opinion even if that opinion contradicts others. Only people with personality have the courage to speak up their minds, no matter what the rest – and even the bishop – might think.

I know, I know… our relation with our bishop is not a normal professional relation. At the same time, we do have the same obligations than civil communicators. Despite we might not be paid likewise, we have the right and the duty to say what we think.

Surely, we will always follow faithfully the guidelines given by the person in charge, even if we do not like them or think otherwise. That’s not the issue. The problem is, many times we arrive late, and we all have abundant experience that if our suggestion arrives when our boss already made his mind, it is unlikely we will persuade him to change.

My suggestion here is… anticipation! Be always ahead of the game. Do not wait: give your opinion before the decision has been taken. Play proactively, be the first one in raising the issue, then explain pros and cons, and finally propose a plan.

Expressing a dissenting opinion requires not only valor (parressia, we say in… Argentinian) but also intelligent argumentation and extreme politesse. In my opinion, the best antidote to carrierism!

*So, let’s ask ourselves, am I courageously intelligent?*

### Final step: work more and better than anybody else

To do all this, you must work a lot. In Church’s life, the formal organizational chart is not necessarily the most important chart; everyday life is more important. What counts is, who solves problems. Work always flow to effective people, no matter their job title.

In these circumstances, the only thing a communicator could do to fulfill our mission is to work harder than anybody else; take on many tasks that others cannot do; work in such a way that set the bar very high; present complete and thorough proposals; and meet deadlines.

Good reports, with accurate and relevant data; persuasive and comprehensive proposals; and attentive evaluation of each initiative require time, endless hours. It may not be the easiest way, but I don’t know anything more effective.

With these four personal traits (universal scope, flexibility, courage and hard work), we will be better prepared for the future ahead.

## II. The future ahead

The *Cantigas of King Alphonse*, written in Galician in the XII century, tell the story of Saint Ero, a monk in the monastery of Armenteira. While he was listening to a mockingbird, he was raptured in contemplation of Heaven. Afterwards, when he came back to his monastery, he didn’t recognize anybody. For him it was a matter of seconds, but in reality, more than a hundred years have passed by.

Let’s envision the opposite scenario. Imagine we are in June 2029. How will be Europe and the Church by then?

That year started with the retirement of Prince Charles at his 80th birthday, in a beautiful ceremony in Westminster presided by Queen Elizabeth. In France, after a small delay, the first money for the reconstruction of Notre Dame just arrived. And of course, Atlético de Madrid won the Champions League after beating Real Madrid 5-0.

In Rome, the reform of the Curia is almost finished. Unfortunately, Pope Ignatius (the first Franciscan Pope) is getting old, and the media started their lists of papabili. Not even one is European, so you can breath…

Seriously: do you think it is difficult how the Church will look like in ten years’ time? No, it is rather very easy, at least about public opinion regarding the Church. Look at the present trends:

* The sexual abuse of minors by clerics will still be on, after many public officials raised the archives of several dioceses and religious orders;
* Media scrutiny will also include issues such as improper relations with adults, economic mismanagement, and abuse of power;
* Some countries have intensified their legislation against discrimination, and now reading aloud in Church some quotes from the Bible and the catechism of the Catholic Church is simply a crime;
* In every country, many Catholics joined activist groups, focused in controlling priests and bishops on a daily basis, and very active in social media;
* EU laws reinforced transparency and open government measures in all European institutions, including religious organizations.

Yes, this is the grim future… Unless we do something about it! As Shakespeare wrote in *Julius Caesar*, "The fault, dear Brutus, is not in our stars, But in ourselves."

Our reaction to what is coming will determine the future. Let’s look to the other side of the pond. In 2002, at the beginning of the scandal in the US, Peggy Noonan, a respected writer and Pulitzer award winner (and a practicing Catholic), wrote in *The Wall Street Journal*:

The church hierarchy used its power and money to cover up cases of sexual abuse by priests and acted above the law. There is the "racketeering dimension": the fact that a RICO suit could be brought against the Church, charging that it acted as an institution to cover up criminal behavior by misleading, lying, and withholding facts. The Church has long attempted to keep priest abuse cases quiet through the paying of hush money –estimated at a billion dollars so far-to families instructed to sign confidentiality agreements.

Eight years later, Cristina Odone wrote in *The Daily Telegraph*:

This Pope has done more than any other churchman to address the issue of priestly child abuse. (…) He can point to some real success in the protection of children: in England and Wales, for instance, child protection officers monitor every encounter between children and clergy. The result is that, ironically, there is no safer place for a child today to be than with a Catholic priest.

There is hope, change is possible. Let’s explore how we com-municators can help the Church to navigate these turbulent waters.

## III. Priorities in crisis management in the near future

I dedicate most of my time to teach business leaders how to deal with a crisis, both in the classroom and as a crisis consultant. There are some best practices in the field, shared by academics and practitioners. I will select some of them which I think vital for the present situation of the Church in Europe.

### Make the Church a human institution

I had the privilege of being in Rome during the Vatican meeting on protection of minors, helping the Vatican press office to write the communication plan, several Q&A documents and in dealing with Spanish-speaking media. I worked a lot but I benefited even more of being in a great team.

The program included a formidable set of lectures by keynote speakers such as Card. Tagle, Marx, Cupich, and –of course– Archbishop Scicluna.

But the real turning point were not those speeches but listening to victims. We heard five recorded testimonies, one from each continent, at the very beginning, plus one more in the aula every day. It is my conviction that they were the reason why the participants came to Rome from 110 countries as individuals, but left as a body –a collegium– with a mission.

This would be my first recommendation for the future. In order to be able to approach any issue with the right tone, Church spokespersons need to be in personal and direct contact with people involved and impacted by the crisis.

Whether it would be victims and their families, a local community, the school parents, the university faculty, a particular journalist, or whoever the stakeholder might be, we (our bishops and ourselves) have to touch the problem with our own hands.

Crises are painful, crises put people’s lives, jobs and reputations in peril, crises destroy wealth accumulated after centuries of good care. It is not easy to deal with an angry public. But we must.

We cannot talk about any dramatic issue if we don’t understand the drama from within. Whether it is a a young couple with difficulties to buy a house, a transgender person, someone who was abused in his or her childhood, a migrant, a priest accused of any wrongdoing, or a doctor who has been sacked from a hospital for refusing an abortion.

Do not manage crisis from an office. Crises are messy but if we (our bishops and ourselves) keep out of the mud and work from the bubble, the inevitable consequence would be to act and speak like bureaucrats. This job cannot be done with a clean white coat in a laboratory, but rather as a doctor in ER.

### Go against the flow

Whenever a crisis hits an organization, the natural tendency is to enter in damage control mode. Those inside the institution feel under siege, and experience the urge to defend themselves from the enemy. “It did not happen, or at least it was not as grave as you might think, or yes it is true but it was an involuntary mistake”.

Excuses, excuses, excuses.

This reaction is so frequent that nobody gets surprised. On the contrary, it confirms the suspicions of everybody.

My suggestion here is to be counterintuitive. Do not defend yourself. Defend the public interest. Find out which principle or value that the facts behind the crisis have hurt, and take it as your flag.

This is the right answer for any Church institution, since anything bad would be against the Church doctrine, morals and law. Stand strong in your identity, and look at the problem from there.

Acting this way will surprise positively your audience, and they will understand that you aim to be part of the solution, not of the problem.

I know it is difficult. European secular media are consistently against the Church in many battles regarding life, family, education and even freedom. It is completely reasonable, since the ethics of autonomy is predominant among reporters, so they see the Church as “the” enemy.

On the side of the Church, defending the dignity of life from the beginning to the end, from the north to the south of the world, from the poorest to the richest, belongs to its identity, and if that means the media will be angry against us, let’s be it. And then, the scandal about the sexual abuse of minors by Catholic clergy happened. We were so used to the fact that the media was attacking us for no good reason, that we missed that in this case, the media were defending important Christian values: protection of minors and vulnerable adults; listening to victims; justice to perpetrators; coherence, mercy…

You probably remember Mexican journalist Valentina Alazraki addressing the presidents of episcopal conferences in February:

If you are in favor of the victims and against the abusers as we, women, families, the press, are, we are allies, we can work together in fighting this plague. But if you are not, be prepared, because we will be your worst enemies!

So, whatever the crisis might be, be counterintuitive and position yourself in defense of public interest. That’s the only way to have moral authority to act and to speak.

### To be fast, you need to be prepared

In today’s accelerated world, one of crisis management’s best practices say, “you only have twenty minutes to react in social media”.

Twenty minutes… in the Church? That’s quite impossible, some of you might say. Quite often it takes more than that to just find my boss…

Quick answers are not a dogma, but a good experience after so many cases. Any kind of accusation creates a vacuum, the same way in the first stage of a tsunami. The water retires, before it comes back in full strength. If you speak up, you interrupt the vacuum, reducing harm. Slower reaction, bigger harm.

If you react fast and provide all relevant facts, there won’t be any more new elements, that are like oxygen to the fire. No more info, the fire dies.

How to do it? One way, of course, is simply being fast and furious. But this is not easy in the Church. Remember, Rome is not the Holy City but the Eternal City for a reason.

The other way is to be prepared. To have a crisis plan. I know, even the name is scary. But it is nothing else than a collection of scenarios: a description of some facts (examination), a definition of a problem (diagnosis) and an action plan (treatment).

Try to convince your boss that you need to be prepared for A, B and C. The reason: because it ensures that whatever happens without him being available, everybody will do as he wants. A few months later, for D, E and F. In a year, you will have a full plan.

Being prepared includes having your channels open and flowing. In a crisis, your credibility is under suspicion. You are the less credible source. You need the help of your friends. You need networking.

### Lawyers could be your best allies

Many crisis management books say that in a crisis, lawyers usually challenge communicators’ advice. Organizations have to act in front of two courts, the legal court and the court of public opinion, and lawyers prefer the former to the latter, and unfortunately bishops too.

Lawyers recommend silence because you are innocent before proven guilty, while communicators insist that you have to speak up even before you have all the facts gathered. And many more differences.

My point here is different. There is something in common: both work for the long term. The key element is to establish a professional relationship with lawyers not during the crisis but well ahead of that.

My suggestion is to work with lawyers in prevention initiatives, and in all issues related to compliance, for the sake of the Church. For instance, revise the latest Church laws (*You are the Light of the earth*, *As a loving Mother*, etc.) and connect every step with communications.

### Transparency, the best condiment ever

In February’s meeting of episcopal conferences at the Vatican, the obliquus *ritornello* was: responsibility, accountability and transparency. For us communicators, the latter is the one in which we could contribute more effectively. But in reality, the three go hand by hand: transparency is the only way to be accountable. “Sunlight is the best disinfectant”, said an US Supreme Court Judge 150 years ago!

Transparency is not a law but part of a culture. Either the institution and its leaders are convinced transparency is their duty, or there will always find excuses not to give bad news (because transparency becomes an issue only when dealing with bad news: nobody holds back good news and great results).

It seems clear to me that the Vatican, the Pope himself, is trying to change Church’s culture and make the Church “a glass house”, as Pope John Paul II said more than once. But cultural changes require local commitment, can’t be done from above.

My suggestion is, grow in transparency little by little. Make a plan. It is easier to decide on your own, than forced by external pressure.

Start with projects and with areas: economic, contracts, job vacancies, etc. Be a promoter of change in your Episcopal conference.

### Finally: do not forget your Stakeholders Map

Last September, my Business School suffered a cyberattack. A hackers’ group called “La Nueve”, composed by nine women, breached our website and got access to our database: names, emails, addresses, bank accounts, credit card numbers, etc.

The communications director has been in her job only for a month. Nevertheless, she navigated the whole cyberattack incredibly well… and – as it usually happens in crises – we were incredibly lucky. “La Nueve” is an “ethical hackers group”, they broke our firewalls just to show they were vulnerable but stole nothing.

Talking to her, the most important takeaway was understanding the stakeholders map. They reacted fast and informed students and other participants. Then, they understood that also donors and sponsor companies’ data were compromised. Afterwards, alumni, faculty and staff. Finally, the thought on former employees…

If you do a stakeholders map at the very beginning, you won’t forget anybody from the start go. Actually, you will be able to put them in order of priority, to choose spokespersons for each one of them, and to make sure your message is consistent.

And remember. After victims, internal stakeholders are the most important one, in companies… and in the Church. Internal communications is probably the Church’s “Cinderella”, the worst ever.

For that reason, my last recommendation is, in crisis, “internal communications always first.”

## Closing

These are my seven recommendations for you in dealing with crises. As you understand, there is nothing new in them: you all know them and practice them on a daily base.

That’s why the key element is developing trust and authority within our bishop's conference, to become our boss’ “persona di fiducia”.

Work hard these three days here, to convince the president of your episcopal conference that you came to this beautiful island to work, not to… buy Maltesers!

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