

Catholic Press Congress

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Roundtable presentation: Ecclesial communion and controversy.

John Thavis, Catholic News Service, Rome bureau chief

Thank you for the invitation to speak at this important congress.

How Catholic communicators deal with controversy is not a theoretical exercise: the priestly sex abuse crisis is a kind of classic case of how Catholic media have had to respond to bad news inside the church. The events of recent months have been very painful for Catholics. The facts are painful. And the news coverage has been painful. None of us in the Catholic press want to be seen as apologists for perpetrators or inept bishops. At the same time, there's a sense that much of the mainstream reporting has not done justice to the complexities of this issue

I want to focus on two things today: first, how the English-language Catholic press has reported on the sex abuse scandal over the last 20 years; and second, some distinctive differences between the Catholic press and the secular press in covering this issue today.

In a sense, for U.S. Catholic media this past year has been déjà vu. In 2002, the clerical sex abuse scandal broke into the public domain with a vengeance. Boston was the epicenter, but soon enough past cases of abuse were emerging in many dioceses (much like we're seeing today in Europe.) But that's not the full history. The revelations of 2002 seemed to replay similar revelations in the United States from the early 1990s. In fact, in 1993, the editors of CNS client publications chose clergy sex abuse as the top story of the year. 1993 -- a year when cases of clerical sex abuse were made public; when major lawsuits were threatening the financial well-being of local churches; and when many U.S. dioceses established policies to prevent this kind of abuse and deal with it.

I think Catholic media have been on a learning curve since that time, nearly 20 years ago. We need to be honest here. For a long time, local diocesan media were reluctant to report on sex abuse cases, often because their bishop didn't want it in the diocesan paper. And this raises some serious questions: What happens when the bishop is the publisher of the newspaper, or directly manages other media in the diocese? If you are a professional communicator and a Catholic who is loyal to the church, where does the commitment to journalistic excellence end? Over the years we've had a series of statements in the church about the need for clear and open communications: Pope John Paul II said the church should be a "glass house." More recently Pope Benedict said the sex abuse crisis calls for transparency and "absolute sincerity" in the church. In light of this, perhaps Catholic communicators should examine their own consciences and ask: Have we held ourselves and, in some cases, our superiors, to these higher standards? Or have we been part of the problem?

Covering the sex abuse story over the last 20 years was much easier for Catholic News Service. We ran hundreds of stories on the topic in the 1990s, and hundreds more over the last decade. It was easier for CNS because although we're associated with the US bishops' conference, we are an editorially independent wire service, and our client newspapers expect us to cover all the news, good and bad, that directly affects the Catholic Church.

I think the events of 2002 began to change the paradigm of Catholic news coverage of the sex abuse scandal. First, because many in the Catholic press shared the sense of outrage over these disclosures. Keep in mind that by this time, the Vatican and the pope had come forward with their own condemnations of sex abuse. It's simple, of course, to express outrage over the sexual abuse of minors. It's much more difficult to assess how well bishops handled these cases, what should be done to perpetrators, what protection policies should be put into place. But increasingly, in 2002, Catholic media joined this discussion. There were critical voices in the Catholic press, then and now, over the way the hierarchy responded. To cite just one example, Russell Shaw, a longtime Catholic journalist, a one-time spokesman for the US bishops and a consultant to this pontifical council, said a culture of clericalism and unnecessary secrecy in the church were primary contributing causes of the sex abuse scandal.

Eight years ago was also a time when many Catholic bloggers emerged, and they gave voice to grassroots questions and criticisms over the sex abuse scandal. Because they were less tied to existing institutions like a diocese or a religious order, they wrote and spoke more freely. They were always opinionated, not always correct with their information, but they contributed greatly to the sense that this was a real conversation among Catholics, and not something being handled behind closed doors.

The adoption of US sex abuse norms in 2002 was a focus of this conversation. I cannot remember a topic that was so thoroughly examined and debated, in such detail, in the Catholic media in the United States. You rarely have Catholic reporters and bloggers talking about the finer points of canon law, but in this case you did. I think US Catholics and Catholic media felt some tension with the Vatican over this; this was evident after Cardinal Castrillon Hoyos, at a Vatican press conference, suggested that sex abuse was a problem primarily in the English-speaking world. That prompted a reaction among many US Catholic journalists: the cardinal's comment was seen as evidence that the Vatican just didn't get it. But in fact, I think the Vatican was slowly "getting it" and Cardinal Castrillon was becoming a minority voice. When the Vatican approved the US sex abuse norms, it marked a turning point in the handling of the abuse crisis. It led to additional Vatican provisions in 2003. And this past year, when many of those provisions were made part of universal church law, it was a sign of how much has changed at the Vatican.

Let me give you an example of what has changed: In 2001, CNS broke the story of Pope John Paul's *motu proprio* "Sacramentorum sanctitatis tutela," which reserved sex abuse cases to the doctrinal congregation, and set up strict new procedures to deal with offenders. We worked for weeks on the story, and we had to squeeze information out of Vatican officials. And this was not a "bad news" story; this was a "good news" story about the Vatican taking action, taking these sins more seriously. You would think they would want the world to know; but they didn't.

Today, it's completely different. As you know, the Vatican has made so much information available about sex abuse policies and procedures that I bet there are very few in this room who have read it all. They have a Vatican Web page dedicated to the issue. The Vatican today is proactive. In terms of information, in terms of journalism, these are hard-won battles.

In recent months, as we all know, the re-emergence of the sex abuse scandal has drawn coverage by Catholic and secular media. And I think this time around, Catholic media share in

the disappointment felt by bishops and the Vatican at the way the mainstream media has reported the issue. Here are some distinctive traits that I think Catholic media have brought to this coverage, traits that are often missing among secular journalists:

1. Context: Because Catholic media are familiar with what happened in 1993 or in 2002, they know the church has already responded with some very good steps and programs.
2. Time frame: Catholic media know that most cases of clerical abuse are from past decades, with very few occurring today -- something that I think most readers of newspapers still don't understand.
3. Fairness: There has been, I think, a "gotcha" mentality in efforts to somehow lay the sex abuse scandal at Pope Benedict's doorstep. Catholic journalists know that this is simply not how it happened, and that the current pope took many steps as head of the doctrinal congregation to deal with the problem. As with many things, he was methodical and determined and patient. In the eyes of some critics, perhaps too patient and deliberate. But certainly he was moving in the right direction. The portrait of Pope Benedict as an architect of cover-up is a false caricature, in my opinion.
4. Perspective: Catholic media have resisted, by and large, the trend toward hammering one big story incessantly, almost to the exclusion of anything else. For the first six months of this year, if you read a story about the Vatican in a major US newspaper, it was probably about sex abuse. This is a hallmark of the cable-news mentality that seems to have invaded every newsroom: a big story is established and then fed daily, like a beast. The essential storyline is never questioned. Details, subtleties and ambiguous information all fall by the wayside. You keep the big story going: this is the gospel of the modern mass media, I think largely for economic reasons. And fortunately, the Catholic press has managed to resist this and keep a perspective, reporting on sex abuse as a painful failure, but not as if it were the only aspect -- or even the main aspect -- of contemporary church life.

What worries me is that Catholic communicators, with all their perspective, context and fairness on the sex abuse story, have not really had much impact beyond their own limited audience. We feel frustration at times over how the mainstream media treats the church; but this frustration is often translated into a kind of closed-circuit discussion among ourselves. There's a risk of becoming too self-congratulatory. We need to ask: how well do we really communicate with the modern world, the wider world, beyond our own ecclesial borders?

One final point: in terms of communion and controversy, the Catholic press is different and distinctive because it shares in the mission of the church -- to spread the Gospel through contemporary means of communication. This is exactly what Catholic News Service says in our own mission statement. We want to tell the truth, and we want to do it fairly and fully.

And if I may, I'll close by reading from our mission statement about how we cover the news: "Some of that news is good and some is bad, but it is what readers need to know in order to work for salvation. They need to know that there are saints in the making in the Church today and they need to know that there are sinners too."