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Jim McDonnell

MANAGING YOUR REPUTATION
A GUIDE TO CRISIS MANAGEMENT
FOR CHURCH COMMUNICATORS

01

PRACTICESERIES

McDonnell, Jim

Managing Your Reputation

A Guide to Crisis Management for Church Communicators

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01

CAMECO Practice Series:

Jim McDonnell

Managing Your Reputation

**A Guide to Crisis Management
for Church Communicators**

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Dr. Jim McDonnell is the Director of Development and Advocacy for SIGNIS, the World Catholic Association for Communication, which operates in around 120 countries. He was Director of the Catholic Communications Centre, the national communications development and training office for the Catholic Church in England and Wales, from 1990 until 2002. Since 2002, he has run McDonnell Communications, an independent communications and public relations advisory service. He has advised numerous charities and church organizations on communications strategy, public relations, reputation management, and the management of change. He was a Consultor of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications from 1990 until 2006.



Monsignore Benone Farcas is Vicar General of the Diocese of Chisinau in the Republic of Moldova. Together with Bishop Anton Cosa, he participated in a customised workshop, consisting of interview training (TV and radio) and communication crisis management, in September 2005. The small Catholic Church in Moldova did not possess its own press office or speaker, but the only Catholic bishop in Moldova and his Vicar General were in great demand from the local media, to be interviewed or to participate in discussion shows. CAMECO was responsible for planning the training, which was co-organised with the German Institut zur Förderung Publizistischen Nachwuchses (ifp), a Catholic journalism school based in Munich. The German donor agency Renovabis offered financial assistance. CAMECO has asked Mons. Benone Farcas to share his personal perspective of the main lessons learned during the course and whether he was subsequently able to integrate them into his contacts with the media.



Fr. Oskar Wermter SJ has worked in Zimbabwe for nearly 40 years. As a Jesuit student, he had a chance to work in that country before independence, returning after his priestly ordination in 1971. From 1987 to 2001, he was the Social Communications Coordinator of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference. He is now a local pastor, working especially among and for victims of HIV/Aids. He also works as a freelance journalist, and is in charge of Jesuit Communications in Zimbabwe, based in Harare. Taking into account his long standing experience of the Church's communication with the media, in a context of strong political and social tensions, CAMECO has asked Oskar Wermter to share his experiences with the reputation management of the Church and her struggle to perceive media either as "enemies or friends".

Introduction

“When ecclesiastical authorities are unwilling to give information or are unable to do so, then rumour is unloosed and rumour is not a bearer of the truth but carries dangerous half-truths.... Responsible leaders in the Church then should try in advance to be ready to deal with a difficult situation and should not abandon the initiative.”

Communio et Progressio, 1971, 121 and 124

“An issue ignored is a crisis ensured”

Henry Kissinger

When an organization finds itself in a difficult situation, either through its own or someone else's fault, how it acts, what it says and how it relates to its stakeholders and the public at large will have effects on its reputation, credibility and trust. In these circumstances organizations have to put into operation the art and skills of a specialised branch of reputation management: crisis management.

Expertise in crisis management is particularly important for those in charge of Church communications. National and diocesan communication offices will often find themselves having to deal with difficult issues, and internal problems can quickly become public and the subject of local or national media interest. A crisis highlights and intensifies the always complex relationship between Church and media.

In a crisis, above all, the national or diocesan communications office has to act as an advocate for the Church's position. The office has to explain and defend the Church's actions and views, correct erroneous or misleading information and try to improve the quality of journalists' interpretation and understanding of unfolding events. In some cases the communications office also has the very difficult task of helping to craft the appropriate statements of regret or apology for mistakes or wrongdoing.

However, it is important that in a crisis especially, the communications office continues to act as an advocate for the media within the Church. It has to relay reporters' needs, and persuade the Church of the benefits of openness and transparency. It may find itself having to placate demanding journalists and trying to persuade reluctant Church leaders to make some positive comment to the media. In this role other colleagues may easily see the communications office as weak or unduly influenced by the media. But when other members of the organization are seeing the media as the enemy, it is vital that someone should be maintaining a more balanced view. In these critical situations the role of the national or diocesan communications office as a bridge between Church leaders and the media is very important.

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1

What is a Crisis?

Many crises can affect organizations. These can range from unexpected physical disasters like fire to criminal activities such as fraud; from the moral failings of individuals to the uncovering of abuse or malpractice. Some crises emerge suddenly and often unexpectedly, for example, a natural disaster or an accident in which people are injured or die. Other crises are systemic crises emerging from failures to implement proper control or management systems, fraud, abuse and mismanagement.

To distinguish what does and what does not constitute a crisis, take the example of a building catching fire. During the fire some employees are injured. In the first place this can be seen as a misfortune or an accident, and people will be sympathetic. However, if it emerges that people have been injured, that the fire was caused because of neglect, or that there was no planning in case of fire, then people and the media will look for someone to blame and the incident will turn into an organizational crisis.

A crisis is
(1) any unplanned event that
(2) may significantly affect normal operations,
(3) create a legal or economic liability, and
(4) pose a real, perceived or possible threat to
the organisation's public reputation or credibility

One generally accepted summary definition of a crisis (based on the work of Vincent Covelo of the Center for Risk Management in Washington, DC) is that it is any unplanned event that (1) may significantly affect normal operations, (2) create a legal or economic liability, and (3) pose a real, perceived or possible threat to the organization's public reputation or credibility. Some planned or foreseen 'events' that may cause difficulties, however, (for example, the merging of parishes or the closing of a school) would also benefit from applying the procedures of crisis management.

Common elements in a crisis

If we unpack this definition there are a few points worth highlighting. **First, a crisis is generally ‘unplanned’ – but ‘unplanned’ does not mean ‘unforeseen’.** Part of crisis management is for organizations to try and anticipate and plan for potential future difficulties that may result in a crisis. Generally, when a crisis occurs the leaders of an organization have to make rapid and correct decisions but without having the full facts of the situation. In order to help those leaders take the right decisions every organization should make a realistic risk assessment of potential problems or threats.

Second, the crisis usually disrupts the normal operation and routine of the organization. In anticipating potential crises it is important to make arrangements for the regular functioning of the organization. And if the crisis means that the organization has to cease functioning for a time (e.g. when a school building burns down, someone is dismissed or there has been a natural disaster) then plans have to be in place so that normal service can be resumed as soon as possible.

Third, a crisis may often have economic or legal implications. Any threat to an organization’s credibility or reputation may affect its financial standing or ability to operate. The scandals around child abuse and the Church, for example, have undoubtedly helped reduce the amount of financial giving to the Church and, as the Church in various countries has discovered, there may be highly serious legal implications.

Fourth, a crisis poses a threat. The threat can be real (it is happening or has happened). It can be perceived (it is seen as a threat by the organization which then feels it has to react (e.g., the Church has to decide how to react to a hostile press article). A threat can also be potential (something that might happen, e.g. a resignation of a senior staff member or the re-emergence of difficult issues that were not properly dealt with in the past (e.g., abuse scandals).

When an incident escalates into a crisis

On a daily basis an organization deals with countless problems, issues, and incidents. These may be difficult or complex but are not normally regarded as crises. However, **minor problems can escalate into crises if they are not brought under control**, and they attract the attention of a wider public (stakeholders and/or the media).

It is not always easy to predict if a particular incident will escalate into a full-blown crisis. Often an organization may not perceive the dangers to its reputation by its actions or words. Then it finds that the world at large takes a different view. These kinds of crises often arise over the different interpretations put on statements or comments by Church leaders. The worldwide furor that arose following Pope Benedict's address to the University of Regensburg in September 2006 is a very good example. The Pope quoted a few lines from the critical views of a Byzantine Emperor about Islam. The Emperor's words were then highlighted by the media which interpreted the Pope as saying that Islam was inherently violent. A storm of criticism from the Muslim world followed. The Pope's spokesman then had the difficult task of convincing the media and public that the Pope's words had been taken out of context and that he was not attacking Islam. The lesson from this episode is that **it is essential to ask how public actions or words could be misinterpreted or perceived by others.**¹

Another good example is the speech on February 7th 2008 by the Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, in which he mentioned the possibility of some aspects of Islamic sharia law being integrated into the English legal system.² His comments first came to public attention in a radio interview at lunchtime (the lecture was scheduled for that evening). His initial comments generated considerable public, Church, media and political hostility largely based on fears that the Archbishop was actively promoting the adoption of sharia law! This misinterpretation was not helped by the BBC headlines around the story and intensified by the hostile headlines generated by the press in general. But the Archbishop compounded the problem when he did not respond to the public outcry by either amending the

text of the lecture or clarifying what he had meant. The result was that the crisis escalated and hostile comment increased. The Archbishop did not finally clarify his position further until four days later.

The lesson here is that in a crisis it is vital to act decisively to limit the damage and clear up misunderstandings and misinterpretation as soon as possible.

Often it is the subsequent publicity and media coverage, not the immediate damage from the crisis itself, which causes the most problems. This is why effective and timely crisis communication management is so important. The reactions to the Pope's and Archbishop's speeches both resulted in the creation of highly volatile situations in which media reports were taken up by others with particular political or religious objectives. Even though the remarks were clarified later, the initial crises were out of control and had turned into wider political and religious confrontations.

2

Crisis Management

Objectives of crisis management

Crisis management is designed to restrict the damage that a crisis can inflict upon an organization and its reputation. It does so by (1) enabling it to maintain normal operations while the crisis is occurring, by (2) ensuring that the crisis itself is dealt with speedily and properly and by (3) communicating what it is doing in ways that help support, or even enhance, its reputation and credibility.

Crisis management is not about the covering up of scandal or manipulation of the press to try and excuse the inexcusable. It will not prevent problems from arising in the first place but crisis planning should reduce the number that do arise and will ensure that others are dealt with more effectively. In a world in which the Church's reputation is constantly under scrutiny and a crisis can emerge at any time, Church communication offices will often find themselves applying the techniques of crisis management.

The Chinese character for crisis combines the characters of danger and opportunity. The main danger in a crisis is that an organization may respond instinctively by adopting a defensive attitude. It might refuse to speak to the media or the public, conceal the truth (cover up), say the wrong things, try to cast the blame on one or two people (scapegoating), down-play the problem or even accuse the media of creating the problem! A crisis badly handled will only reinforce the culture of suspicion.

Common errors in crisis management

A classic case of how a crisis can spiral out of control and the key errors that can contribute to this lack of control is to be found in how the British government responded to an outbreak of foot and mouth disease among cattle in 2002. Indeed the headline in the Times newspaper read “Outbreak of panic turned crisis to disaster” (July 23, 2002).

The headline accompanied the official inquiry into the crisis. That inquiry identified **eight key errors** – errors that are repeated in many crises.

First there was **panic and confusion**. Decision making was chaotic and there was lack of public confidence. Second, there was a **lack of contingency or advance planning** for such an event. Third, there was **no agreed strategy** among those who had to take decisions, so they wasted much time in arguing over what should be done. Fourth, there was **delay in passing on crucial information** early on in the crisis. Information that would have helped pre-empt the worst of the crisis. Fifth, there was **last-war syndrome**; the government was so preoccupied with planning against another outbreak of BSE (“mad cow disease”) that it paid little attention to the potential risk from foot and mouth infection. Sixth, there was **failure to heed, or pass on to the right people, early warning signals** – as much as 8 months before the first cases were diagnosed. Seventh, there was **loss of trust** by the public. The government minister in charge went so far as to say on TV that the situation was ‘absolutely under control’ when it was quite obvious that this was untrue. It looked as though the government was not taking responsibility for its failures. Lastly, those in charge simply failed to recognize the extent of the

impact of the crisis and were accused of **complacency**. These errors could be replicated in many crises, think, for example, of the initial responses of Church authorities to reports of child abuse.

So, to put these problems into a more positive form,
good crisis management will:

- (1) minimize panic and confusion,
- (2) have crisis plans available,
- (3) quickly develop an agreed strategy,
- (4) have good communication systems,
- (5) be ready for potentially new problems,
- (6) have well functioning early-warning systems,
- (7) build trust and credibility and avoid complacency.

3

Preparing for a Crisis

What can Church communication offices do to prepare for crises? The most important step is to begin to **develop a crisis management plan**, a document that tries to anticipate the kind of problems that an organization is likely to face and instructions on how to respond in an effective manner. When a crisis occurs there is a period of initial chaos and confusion and most people find themselves in some form of temporary shock. Having a crisis plan helps people to get through that initial period and minimize the panic and confusion.

The Crisis Plan

A crisis plan is a **formal set of procedures that enables participants in a crisis to take the minimum steps necessary to start taking control of the situation.**

Every organization has a set of procedures for dealing with the outbreak of fire; these procedures specify who has particular responsibility for specific actions, the evacuation procedures and routes to be followed, who is to contact the fire brigade etc. These procedures constitute a relatively straightforward crisis plan.

Let us take, for example, the situation in a diocese and see how the principles of crisis management could be translated into a workable plan in a Church setting.

A crisis management plan should indicate, on the basis of risk assessment, the most likely scenarios that might lead to a crisis. In a diocesan plan potential problems could include: allegations of abuse, sexual scandal, financial mismanagement at diocesan or parish level, natural disasters or accidents, personnel or employment disputes, parish or school closures or reorganization, church reordering, controversies over the location of churches or other institutions etc. These scenarios should also recognize that many crises arise from difficulties involving Church-related institutions such as schools, colleges, hospitals, care homes etc.

The plan should set out the members of the Crisis Management Team – those who will have responsibility for taking the major decisions during a crisis. (This is discussed in detail below).

A good diocesan plan will contain clear instructions about what key people are expected to do and how essential tasks are to be undertaken. For example, the plan should set out guidance for administrative and other staff as well as clergy as to how press or other enquiries during the period of crisis should be handled. It should make it clear that all enquiries are to be directed to the communications office (or other designated spokesperson). All public statements or information should be channelled through this clearly identified contact.

The diocesan plan should contain a checklist of administrative actions to be taken in the immediate aftermath of being informed about a crisis. This checklist should include such mundane, but vital, information as: how the crisis team is to be alerted; how they are going to meet and what happens if some people are not available; what equipment or resources are likely to be needed; and essential contact details.

A plan should also **identify those key people (stakeholders) inside and outside the organization who might have a crucial effect on how a crisis unfolds**. In a diocesan context, for example, when a parish church is to be closed, stakeholders might include: parishioners, parish clergy, those employed by the parish, benefactors and their families, local residents, local politicians, special interest groups, the local public, Catholic press, the local and/or national media.

In crises involving cases of allegations of abuse or other criminal activity **good links with the statutory authorities and the police can be vital**. Such relationships can also help ensure that rumours are not spread and that no further damage is done. It is also vitally important to **have a clear idea of which media are of particular importance to the organization**, such as an important regional newspaper which covers the territory of a diocese or local statutory or police authorities. It is also important for the Church to **have a good working relationship with appropriate journalists** in good times so that, one hopes, there is some fund of goodwill when they come to ask difficult questions at times of difficulty.

Crisis plans need not be lengthy but they must be clear and updated regularly. Diocesan procedures and guidelines have to be updated on a regular basis and tested against changing realities. Setting out the possible scenarios that needed to be guarded against is not enough. The plan is only useful if there is systematic process of monitoring individual and organizational behaviour to ensure that proper procedures and guidelines are being followed, for example, that financial accounts are kept properly. **It is important to rehearse the crisis plan in simulations of likely situations**. It is too late to correct and refine your plan when the crisis is upon you. A crisis plan or a set of guidelines, however elaborate, is of no use if it simply sits in a drawer and is never opened.

In the end, the details of a crisis management plan will be determined by the exact circumstances of the organization drawing it up. It is important that a plan be tailored to the real needs of the organization – using an ‘off-the-shelf’ plan can be helpful as a guide but should not substitute for the task of working out a plan that is precisely relevant to the particular office compiling it.

A Crisis Management Plan should:

- Indicate the most likely scenarios leading to a crisis
- Contain clear instructions for tasks and responsibilities
- Include a checklist of administrative actions
- Identify key people, both inside and outside the organization, who may have a crucial effect on how the crisis unfolds
- Be clear and regularly updated

(see template Diocesan Crisis Management Plan in Appendix)

The Crisis Management Team

One of the most important parts of a crisis plan is that which sets out the roles and responsibilities of the crisis management team. The team are those people who will take charge during a crisis and who will ensure that the crisis plan is implemented properly.

The team needs a clear role, to have a proper leadership structure and sufficient authority to take decisions quickly. Members of a crisis team should obtain training in the basic skills of crisis management and keep themselves updated on best practice. Finally, the team has the task of reviewing and evaluating how successfully particular crises have been handled and ensuring that the lessons are learnt and put into practice.

In a diocese the team might consist of the Diocesan Bishop, one or more Vicar Generals or Auxiliary Bishops, the Communications Officer, the Bishops' Secretary and other experts, as required.

The communication officer plays a vital role in the crisis management team. The person responsible for communications is the link between the internal actions

and decisions and outside observers, critics and supporters (see below communications expertise).

Four key roles

There are four key roles that must be present in any crisis management team: Leadership, Expertise, Communications and Administrative Support.

First, leadership: have one clear leader. There is nothing worse than a situation in which a number of people are all trying (and failing) to exercise a leadership role. Too many chiefs will inevitably lead to disaster. The leader of the team may not be the Bishop but it must be someone who has the authority and competence to see that the work of the team is effective and to ensure that it retains control of what is done in the situation.

Second, expertise: use the appropriate experts. The appropriate expertise needs to be assembled to give informed advice and help in relation to the specific crisis (human, financial, legal, religious etc.) and so a number of experts may form a “pool” which can be drawn upon as appropriate. In the majority of cases, however, it is essential that someone with legal expertise is a core member of the team.

Third, communications expertise: A crisis is not a time for the Church to be struggling to find competent and credible people to deal with the media or other stakeholders. In a crisis the pivotal role of the communications office in interpreting the world of the media and the world of the Church to each other is of the highest importance.

The communications office must think about and manage internal communications as well as communications with the wider world. Internal communications covers all those communications with stakeholders such as victims, colleagues, management, employees, supporters and funders. In relation to the Church this includes the appropriate Church offices and significant people who need to know what is happening. It is essential that the communications person or team should have had crisis management training.

It is also important that there be one person acting as a spokesperson during

the crisis. In all cases this spokesperson should be someone who can speak with authority on behalf of the institution. In the best case, and with appropriate training, this person will be the chief executive of the organization facing the crisis, or in Church terms the Bishop, parish priest or religious superior. Often, if other people feel unable to deal effectively with the media, the communications officer has to take on this role.

Fourth, support: administrative backup. Ensure that the crisis team has the appropriate administrative backup and resources to carry out its task. Administrative questions, which must be considered in advance, include: Who will answer the telephone during a crisis? Where will the team meet? Who will contact team members to bring them together? Who will keep a record of the team's decisions?

The importance of record keeping

Accurate and systematic record keeping is very important. Those dealing with crises must first of all accept that all of their actions will probably come under close scrutiny (if not immediately, then certainly later) and that they have to act in ways that will be seen to be reasonable and appropriate. This means that in managing a crisis it is vital that decisions and actions are recorded so that the reasons why certain measures were taken can be easily ascertained and evaluated. The very act of having to record is also helpful as it forces people to clarify why they are taking certain actions and what they are hoping to achieve. And an accurate record keeping system cannot be established without competent support personnel (see above **administrative backup**).

The Crisis Management Team is responsible for implementing the Crisis Plan properly. Four key roles must be present:

- one clear leader
- appropriate expertise
- communications and
- administrative backup

4

The Stages of a Crisis

Every crisis goes through a number of phases and it is useful to bear this in mind as the crisis unfolds. At each stage of the process there are particular challenges and actions that need to be implemented.

The following is an overview of the process:

The **existing context**: the situation out of which the crisis emerges. Here warning signs are often missed even as the crisis is brewing. Crises can be minimized if there exist effective monitoring and early warning systems, e.g. proper accounting systems that can detect early signs of financial irregularities or an effective child protection policy.

The **eruption of the crisis**: the crisis happens and creates a period of initial chaos and confusion as people struggle to assess what is happening. People need to avoid acting precipitately and give themselves time and space to assess the situation.

The **impact of the crisis**: the consequences of the crisis begin to be felt as it affects the normal operations of the organization and demands time and resources to handle. The crisis management team should be convened and the plan activated.

The **strategic phase**: as the problem continues to unfold the organization formulates and adopts a policy to deal with the crisis. In some organizations, strategy is little more than panic and confusion, in others a crisis plan is developed and priorities determined.

The **implementation phase**: the plan is put into operation and the organization begins to take decisive appropriate actions (or panic and confusion simply deepen). In this phase it is important to constantly review and adapt as circumstances change.

The **evaluation phase**: this is often neglected but is crucial to the better handling of future difficult issues. The origins of the crisis are examined, the actions taken

are evaluated and reviewed, the plan is updated and appropriate actions taken to help avoid similar problems in the future. The next section looks at each of these phases in more detail.

The context of the crisis

It is vital that the Church, like other organizations, have the early warning systems in place that will alert it to potential or incipient problems. In very many cases crises could have been mitigated or better dealt with if leaders had been told earlier of brewing problems. As mentioned earlier, such systems include formal processes such as proper accounting systems and child protection policies but informal ways of keeping in touch with the views of clergy, parishioners, staff etc. are also important.

The eruption of the crisis

When a crisis breaks there is **a period of initial chaos and confusion.** Rumours tend to spread quickly and there is a great deal of uncertainty about what is happening. In this period, which can last from a few minutes to many hours, it is vital to be able to draw upon a crisis plan. Following the procedures of the plan helps to give order to the chaos and to ensure that correct steps are taken. An airline pilot, for example, knows what must be done in an emergency because there is a clear protocol to be followed. A crisis is not the time to be inventing a new set of procedures.

The impact of the crisis

The initial period of confusion is soon followed by the impact phase as **the consequences of the crisis ripple out through the organization.** Normal operations may be disrupted or halted. An example would be a serious accident to a pupil in a school where the initial shock is followed by the spread of information and rumour throughout the school and wider community, disrupting lessons and bringing a host of legal, operational and communication difficulties.

It is vital in this initial period that the crisis team give themselves time and space to approach the crisis in a relatively calm manner. For example, if a journalist alleges that a priest has fathered a child, there should be no immediate reaction – either positive or negative – as the facts are still unknown. The person dealing with the issue needs to take the time to discover what has actually occurred. Space is also important; a place to think and to plan, away from ringing telephones and people demanding instant answers.

In assessing the situation there are many questions to be asked and answered.

The first set concern the crisis and its origins:

- What exactly is the crisis?
- When did it begin?
- Who has it affected? Has anyone been harmed or put in danger?
- Has this ever happened before?
- Why has it occurred? (multiple causes)
- How long is it likely to last?
- What is the impact of the crisis?
- What are the potential consequences of the crisis?

The strategic phase

Organizations need to move quickly to the strategic phase. This is made much easier if the organization has an already developed crisis plan and a crisis management team. Where these have to be invented it is easy to act in a panic stricken manner. People may deal with immediate pressures (from journalists, for example) rather than taking control.

In this phase **the questions concern the scope of the crisis and setting priorities for action.** These questions are both tactical (concerning actions which have to be taken immediately) and strategic (longer term actions):

- What will be the effect of the crisis on operations?
- What are our immediate priorities?
- What options and resources are available to contain the crisis?
- What experts should be brought into the crisis management team to help with the management of the crisis?

- What are we going to do next?
- What is our long term strategy?

An important set of questions concern communications:

- Who knows about it?
- Does the crisis pose a threat to our reputation or credibility?
- Which people (stakeholders) need to be notified about this situation?
- What are the key messages that need to be communicated?
- What channels should be used to deliver the key messages?
- Is the crisis newsworthy?

The implementation phase

During the process of formulating and implementing the strategy it is important that the crisis team is able to hold the media off. In many cases this may mean preparing and issuing a 'holding statement' (see below section 7). It is important to respond quickly but in a controlled way even if the facts of the situation are still unclear. **The objective is not to be driven by media pressure into making bad decisions** and giving comments or statements that may later have to be revised or withdrawn.

At the same time **the crisis team has to activate the crisis plan and actually deal with the crisis itself as well as handle the communications process.** This is why it is vitally important that the team set its priorities early and develop a strategic plan as quickly as possible. Neither of these actions is possible, however, unless the team has been able to discover the facts of the case and is clear about what has actually happened.

A major part of the strategic and implementation phase of a crisis is taken up with the **management of communications.** As has been noted before, **the perception of what is happening can be more problematic and difficult than the actual events.** The team has to decide on the key messages to be communicated, and how they are to reach the right public. As the crisis unfolds the management of media relations becomes ever more important. The messages being conveyed through the media have to be truthful, caring and credible.

In the course of the crisis the initial plan will have to be reviewed and adapted as more facts come to light and the organization deals with stakeholder or media interest. It is important to be flexible and quick and ensure that there is a **good flow of information to the crisis team.**

For many organizations it will be important to draw on outside help. In Church terms it is important that larger Church organizations which have the in-house expertise (or have easy access to it) are easily accessible by other Church or Church-related institutions when things go wrong. This is why it is important, for example, that national and diocesan communication offices be competent in the skills of crisis management and willing and able to offer help and support to other Church institutions. A more detailed examination of **crisis communications** is found in section 5 below.

After the crisis is past: reflection and evaluation

Once the crisis is past **there should be an investigation into the management of the crisis itself and the situation out of which it emerged.** Unfortunately, this evaluation often fails to take place. It is surprising, for example, how long it took the Church in different countries to undertake a detailed and rigorous examination of the origins and handling of the sexual abuse scandals.

Investigation and evaluation can take place in-house, though in the more serious cases it is more effective if people not immediately associated with the issue do the evaluation. An investigation needs to consider questions such as:

- Where there any early warning systems in place?
- When should the danger signals have been picked up?
- Was the crisis caused by action or inaction?
- When was the problem identified?
- What was done? When and by whom?
- How well did the crisis management systems work?
- How did the crisis management team function?
- How useful was the crisis management plan?

- How successful was the communication strategy?
- How can the systems be improved?
- What lessons can be learned and how can they be applied?

It is essential that the results of the evaluation are fed back into the existing crisis management plan so that it can be updated in the light of the experience of the crisis (see above 3 The Crisis Plan).

Communicating in a Crisis: General Principles

5

This section takes a look at crisis communications in more detail. The observations and recommendations here are derived from practical experience of managing various forms of crisis.

Trust and credibility

There are two key principles that govern the management of communication in a crisis. The first is that **the organization's main goal is to win as much trust and credibility among all its publics as it can.**

Trust and credibility will only be won if the organization is seen to accept responsibility for dealing with the crisis. Taking responsibility is not the same as taking the blame or confessing to being at fault. Taking responsibility means being seen to face up to the problem, to be active in seeking to resolve it, to be honest and open and to accept the consequences if one takes bad decisions or acts unwisely. The crisis will only deepen if the leadership of an organization is felt to be trying to avoid its responsibilities or to blame someone else.

A good example of someone taking responsibility, and taking it early, is that of Sir Michael Bishop, the Chairman of the airline, British Midland. In 1989 a Brit-

ish Midland jet crashed in central England. Sir Michael Bishop arrived at the scene very quickly. He immediately announced that the airline would do all in its power to ensure that the families of victims were looked after and that there would be a thorough investigation of the cause of the accident. Bishop also made himself available immediately for a whole range of media interviews so that he could influence the communications agenda from the beginning. Eventually pilot error was identified as the cause of the crash but the public did not lose confidence in the airline – it was perceived to have acted in a caring and responsible manner.

By contrast, in the same year, Exxon was heavily criticized over its actions when the tanker Exxon Valdez ran aground and spilled 250,000 barrels of oil in Prince William Sound in Alaska. Among the many errors made by the company, the head of Exxon, Lawrence Rawl, waited six days to make a statement and did not visit the scene of the accident until nearly three weeks later. The public had the impression that Exxon did not take the accident seriously. Exxon both failed to be seen to take responsibility and failed to communicate its message early and credibly.

First impressions count in a crisis. The public have a tendency to make up their minds early and once settled it is very difficult, if not impossible, to shift attitudes. British Midland understood that, Exxon did not. **For the Church,** which is not used to reacting quickly, this reality is a **difficult challenge.** Nonetheless, Church institutions have to learn to seize the initiative in communications and to establish their position early in a crisis.

Acting as Social Communications Coordinator of the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference from 1987 to 2001, Fr. Oskar Wermter SJ has gained a long standing experience of the Church's communication with the media in a context of strong political and social tensions. CAMECO asked him to share examples of the reputation management of the Church and Interaction with the media.

“Catholic priest accused of rape” read the Sunday morning headline. The telephone does not stop ringing in my office on Monday morning. A young reporter is convinced that if the Church did away with celibacy that sort of thing would not happen. I suggest that we should first find out the facts. That is now my problem: nobody will tell me; in fact, the officials I talk to honestly do not know. I do find out that the priest allowed a woman, who claimed to be homeless and stranded, to stay in his house overnight. Later I am told that she tried to blackmail him. When he refused to give her any money she accused him of having raped her. The court is not convinced and dismisses the case, which is less than a clear verdict of innocence. Still, we ask the paper to publish the dismissal of the case which they do – at the bottom of page four, in a little box.

Fr. Oskar Wermter SJ,
Jesuit Communications Zimbabwe

Give reliable and accurate information

The second major principle governing communications is that an organization should give reliable and accurate information. As far as possible, bearing in mind legal constraints etc, all available information should be disclosed. It is also important to be honest about what is 'not known' but be willing to disclose more as it becomes available. In a crisis time is often of the essence and communication may need to begin almost immediately – but when the facts are still unclear it is best if the organization is able to admit that it does not yet have all the information it needs. In the words of Warren Buffett, the US billionaire, “First, state clearly that you do not know all the facts. Then promptly state the facts you do know.” (see 7 below, Put together an initial holding statement)

The importance of reliability and accuracy means that **it is unwise to speculate**. Your speculation may turn out to be wrong and then you will have a harder task to convince the public of your reliability in the future. The Spanish government of José Maria Aznar suffered badly (it lost the election) when it blamed the 2004 Madrid terrorist bomb attacks on Basque separatists and then subsequently had to admit it was wrong.

An important principle is that the organization should try to ensure that it is the first to reveal bad or good news. In the case of bad news this emphasizes that the organization is acting in a transparent and accountable way and minimizes charges of concealment and cover-up.

It is important to **issue regular updated information** on the crisis and on what is happening. Failure to keep the media or other stakeholders informed (even if the information is minimal) encourages the growth of rumour and speculation.

Put people first

It is also **vitaly important that communication puts people first**. The tone and style of the message has to be appropriate to the seriousness of the situation. This is especially important for the Church, which needs to show that it is living by its principles, and is not simply concerned with the protection of the institution.

Many crises have an intense emotional dimension and this needs to be addressed and acknowledged. One of the most bitter criticisms of the Church authorities in relation to clerical abuse was that they did not care enough about the people who had been victimized, that their communication was defensive and 'unfeeling'. The humanity and compassion of the communicator has to be revealed.

These principles apply as much in dealing with internal publics as they do when dealing with the media.

6

Communicating in a Crisis: The Role of the News Media

When a crisis becomes public, the general public rely on the news media for information and the organization is subject to intense scrutiny from the press, radio and television. In this situation no organization can rely upon any kind of assumptions in its favour. Indeed, more and more, there is often a presumption that the organization or its representatives are guilty as soon as allegations of wrong-doing or incompetence are made. In these circumstances **the Church, like any organization, has to prove its competence, honesty and care for people by its words and actions during the crisis.**

It is important not to be defensive but to see that, however difficult the crisis, there is also an opportunity for the Church to present itself and what it stands for in a positive way.

What do the media want?

If organizations are to be effective in dealing with the news media in a crisis it is important that there is a clear understanding that journalists are looking for news values. They are interested in what is happening to people, especially well known personalities.

The best journalistic stories involve people (human interest stories, dramas, real life soap operas.) The news media are also drawn to the unusual or novel, to conflict and drama, to scandal, and to the impact on the wider community. All the news media want pictures: visual (TV, photographs), audio (radio 'sound bites'), and written (dramatic quotes). Pictures remain in the public mind after the crisis has passed: today's casual remark is tomorrow's headline.

All journalists want to be first with the news, to have a better story or a different angle than their rivals. They scramble to get facts and to keep track of changing events. In a crisis journalists look for someone to blame. In a short time there are allegations and accusations and difficult questions raised about fault and responsibility.

In these circumstances an organization, particularly the Church, must adjust its habitual rhythm of dealing with problems and understand that it has to respond quickly and effectively. Often one of the tasks of a national or diocesan communications office, for example, is to persuade those in charge to accept and acknowledge that the public expects to know what is happening and how the crisis is being handled. Many crises have high news value and remain under the public gaze for some time.

The tactic of retreating behind defensive walls and trying to shut the media out only makes matters worse. It encourages the media and the public to believe that the institution under scrutiny is covering up incompetence at best and, at worst, wrongdoing. The best approach is to give public (media) communications a high priority and to produce caring, consistent and clear crisis related messages. **Practical tips** for dealing with the media are given in section 7 below.

The role of the internet

One complicating factor in dealing with the media today is the growing role of the internet. Many media crisis management texts talk about the press and broadcast media but still contain relatively little on how the internet is complicating the

Vicar General Monsignore Benone Farcas was already a highly demanded interview partner by Moldovan media, when he participated together with his bishop in a customised two-days-training session. CAMECO has asked Mons. Benone Farcas to share his personal perspective about the usefulness of such a training.

Learning how to deal with the media

A personal workshop report from a Church leader's point of view

“Look at the camera!” This is one of the many useful lessons I learned a few years ago, when I had the wonderful opportunity to take part in a workshop during which we were taught how to deal with the media. Any time I see a reporter with a camera approaching me, these words pop up in my mind and I begin to act accordingly.

Holding a leadership position in the Church inevitably brings the necessity to deal with media. A pastor, a rector, a bishop and its collaborators, cannot avoid interacting with various newspapers, TV and radio stations, etc., either for providing mere information or to comment on a variety of events. Consequently, a certain degree of qualification in this area is vital, in order to have an efficient and fruitful relationship with media. This kind of preparation is essential when a spokesperson must provide sensitive information, deliver an important message to the public, or answer uncomfortable questions.

I was privileged to receive such coaching at a workshop with the ifp – Catholic Media Academy in Germany. An exceptional team of professionals taught us how to communicate with media, how to prepare for and manage a crisis situation, how to avoid mistakes in our relationship with media, etc. This workshop proved to be extremely useful to me over the years, in a number of ways. I would like to underline just a few of them.

Behavior in front of the camera

*One of the most important issues broached at the workshop was **how to behave in front of a camera**. It appears to be very simple, but in fact it is not that easy. Once in front of a camera, especially when taken by surprise, one does not know what to do with the hands, whether to look at the reporter or at the camera, how to position the body, etc. These apparently minor details may make somebody uncomfortable and have a negative influence on the quality of the statements he/she is making.*

I had the opportunity to participate a few times in live broadcasts on a TV station both before and after I completed the workshop. Watching the recorded broadcasts afterwards, I could easily notice the difference in my behavior during the shows. After my training in Ludwigshafen, I appeared much more relaxed, my eyes did not search erratically where to look, my hands were calm and, as a result, the performance was very much improved. The same holds true for other instances when I had to appear before a camera, whether I had to give an interview or a speech, or answer a surprise question concerning some public event.

Be aware of issues

Another essential lesson I learned was to monitor the media, to be aware of events that were taking place. When somebody knows what is happening in society, what events are taking place, how other institutions or leaders respond, one can be disposed for an adequate and well prepared answer, in case one is asked to deliver an opinion on a certain event.

For instance, a few years ago, the government of Moldova expelled a few foreign priests of a certain Church because they did not have a valid “work permit” which would have allowed them to receive a residence permit and to remain in Moldova, in order to continue pastoral work among their communities. Immediately, this decision gained a political dimension and turned into a considerable conflict, in which several government institutions and various Churches were involved, as well as their leaders. The conflict escalated and different exponents of the media began taking sides. It did not take long before reporters from various newspapers, news agencies, and TV stations knocked on our doors and started to ask the opinion of the Catholic Church on this matter. By that time, thanks to the lessons learned in Germany, our diocesan communication office had already prepared a unique answer delivered first by our office and then, with small and insignificant variations, by other pastors of our Diocese. The outcome was that the Catholic Church delivered a unique, well prepared, and consistent statement which was not misinterpreted afterwards, as was the case of many other institutions that issued statements concerning that unfortunate conflict.

Preparing for a crisis

Finally, and maybe one of the most significant lessons we learned at the workshop, was how to manage a crisis situation. Fortunately, the Catholic Church in Moldova did not have to face a major crisis which could affect her reputation and integrity. Nevertheless, the principles of actions in such a situation are known to our diocesan communication office and a plan of action has been already developed in case such a crisis should arise.

Although we did not have to face a real crisis, we have to deal quite often with an element specific to crisis situations, namely the surprise questions. It happens frequently that a reporter approaches us asking for our opinion on a matter we are not familiar with, or on a recent event which we do not know anything about. In this situation, the

principles that usually apply when a crisis erupts are very useful, namely, “do not panic, do not deliver hasty statements, do not jump to conclusions, and stick to the known facts”. When the journalist or the reporter insists you give out more detailed or accurate information, continue to repeat the same general answer until you are able to gain more information on the issue and prepare a more complete statement.

Several years ago, I was approached by a reporter at the end of a liturgical celebration and asked about a conflict that had broken out just hours before and had not yet been in the news. It involved a church building that was used by the Catholic Church during the Soviet regime and which had been returned to the legitimate owners. Apparently, the community that owned the church building tried to establish a wall around the territory surrounding the church (which, by the way, was located in a cemetery) and restricted, to some extent, public access to that area. At that time, I had no information whatsoever concerning the conflict and, consequently, I could not deliver a knowledgeable opinion. The reporter insisted, almost aggressively, that I give a more detailed answer, on the grounds that a relevant number of Catholics are buried in that cemetery. Without any panic, I continued to stick to the known facts and provided the same answer. During the workshop, we were told that a reporter who receives the same answer to a question two or three times will give up, as nobody is interested in listening to the same statement three times. In fact, after a third attempt, the reporter gave up asking questions on this issue.

These are just a few instances which prove how important the principles I gained at the workshop were for me. Over the years I have repeatedly emphasized the enormous importance of such coaching and what a positive impact it might have on the activity of the persons who have a leadership position within the Church. I hope that this programme will continue to be available for the preparation of those whose work within the Church requires frequent rapport with the media.

Mons. Benone Farcas

media landscape. Good examples of how the internet is having an impact can be seen the way in which the Church child abuse scandals were covered in the United States. According to Stephen O’Leary, “The Internet has fundamentally altered the balance that governed the relationship between media institutions and more traditional powers such as the Church. Journalists and bishops alike are now struggling with the new realities of covering religion in the wired world.”³

O’Leary identifies a number of important changes that the web brought in the reporting of the scandals.

First, formerly secret or confidential information and documents relating to the cases were posted on line. This turned local scandals into scandals of national interest.

Second, the impact of the scandals was greater as posting material on the web allowed “people to read news in cumulative batches, and not only as day-to-day coverage [...], the effect of reading through the Boston Globe’s outstanding web archive is overwhelming, and contributes to the perception of the problem as systemic and international in scope.” The website of the Poynter Institute, an ethical watchdog and training outfit for journalists, has the “Clergy Abuse Tracker,” the National Catholic Reporter newspaper has another “Abuse Tracker”.

Once a news story is stored on the web in digital form it is both permanent and easily available. When a new Church crisis is reported on the BBC news website, for example, one of the most popular sites in the world, the page also contains links to previous similar stories.

Third, the internet offers opportunities for pressure groups and individuals to make sure that their voices are heard by the public and the media. O’Leary cites the example of the Survivors Network of Those Abused by Priests (SNAP) founded by Barbara Blaine. “The SNAP Website provides [...] links to SOAR (Survivors Of Abuse in Religion), an international e-mail support group for victims, and some pointed suggestions for journalists covering the story (‘Tips to Reporters Investigating Sexual Abuse by Priests’).” Another website is www.Bishopaccountability.org which provides updates on cases, a database of accused priests, survivors’ accounts and other documents.

This phenomenon is increasingly obvious in all kinds of situations as lobby groups and campaigners create alternative sources of news and information. It is important, therefore, that **an organization must ensure that its own website is up-to-date and accurate so that it can put its side of the story.** Websites informing the public about what the Church is doing in the field of child protection, for example, have been set up in recent years by Catholic Bishops' Conferences in the United States and in other countries. Journalists are increasingly going first to an organization's website for basic information and news **and if they do not find what they are looking for there they will turn to other, sometimes unreliable, sources of information.**

The impact of the internet on the coverage of crises re-emphasises the importance of transparency, accountability and the provision of accurate and up-to-date information in the management of difficult situations.

The impact of social media

The power of the internet to affect crisis communication has been intensified by the rapid expansion of social media. Social media can both affect the development of a crisis and in some cases be the catalyst for a crisis themselves. These social media provide opportunities for individuals and groups to have their voices heard and to influence the way in which events (and the way they are handled) are perceived by the public and the media. Moreover, the traditional media themselves use social media extensively to extend the reach of their stories.⁴ For these reasons, it is vitally important that Church organizations have in place policies for social media and guidelines for their use. A good example is the *United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Social Media Guidelines*.⁵

Which services count as social media varies. Sometimes the term "social media" refers only to "social networks" like Facebook, Twitter Google + or LinkedIn; at other times it can include any service that allows a degree of interaction, including blogs, YouTube and Wikipedia. However, all these services share some important characteristics which can affect crisis communications.

First, **these media have the possibility to amplify and extend the impact of a crisis.** For example, the scandal in Germany in 2013-14 around the lavish expenditure of the Bishop of Limburg, Franz-Peter Tebartz-van Elst, who was eventually removed by the Pope, was intensified by the extensive and unremitting coverage of the affair in blogs, on Twitter and YouTube. The affair soon gained notoriety outside of Germany and was a popular topic on social media across the globe.

Second, **information, news and opinions on social media are disseminated with great speed and much more widely than ever before.** A tweet on Twitter or a post on Facebook or a video uploaded to YouTube can be commented upon, re-tweeted or shared in minutes by people across the world. Local stories can quickly become regional, national or even global stories within minutes.

This speeding up of the news and comment cycle means that **crisis management planning is more vital than ever.** In the past, organizations might have had hours or even days to consider how to respond to a crisis before the event was in the public arena. Today, it is possible that a crisis triggered by social media can erupt in minutes and that demands for comment or clarification are made almost immediately. In these circumstances, it helps to have a plan and to have some management procedures in place to minimize the risk of panic or a hasty and inappropriate response.

Third, **social media are interactive.** They give their users the ability to easily create their own content, to interact with other users and to create networks of social relationships. In other words, social media provide the space for people to share news and information, air opinions and have conversations. Today most newspaper websites allow readers to comment directly on a story and these comments, as well as the original story, can then be shared on a variety of social media platforms. In effect, social media allow everyone to be a “journalist” and to share their unedited interpretation of events with potentially unlimited numbers of others. In this environment, misinformation, rumours and speculation can spread unchecked.

These characteristics also mean that **opinions expressed on social media can themselves become the causes of crises.** Opinions expressed on blogs, Facebook or in tweets can easily become the centre of controversy, as many politicians and celebrities have found to their cost. In September 2013, a priest in England, for example, wrote some comments on his blog which a local journalist interpreted as being offensive about poor people. Soon the priest was being heavily criticised in the news media and he then had to clarify that his intention was not to denigrate but to draw attention to the plight of the poor. On the other hand, his Bishop was criticised by other Catholic bloggers for not issuing a statement in his support until a couple of days later.

Another related factor is that, **because of their informal nature, people feel free to express their opinions on social media in less constrained ways.** Without editorial controls, people have found themselves tweeting or posting messages or photos perceived to be offensive, disrespectful, libellous or even blasphemous. In extreme cases, the consequences can be severe, as a Saudi journalist, Hamza Kashgari, found in 2012 when he tweeted his reflections on the Prophet Muhammed and was threatened with death.

One danger is that people using these media become so used to their immediacy and informality that they forget that they are not simply chatting among friends and that **private comments (as on Facebook) can very easily become public.** In crisis management terms this slippage between the private and public also has an organizational dimension. A person working for the Church may have to be careful that their personal use of social media is not seen as expressing the views of the organization they work for. For the Church, even more difficult can be those cases where clergy or religious use social media to express views at variance with those of their Bishops or religious superiors.

The US Conference of Catholic Bishops guidelines on social media warn that

“Personal sites of church personnel should also reflect Catholic values. ... Church personnel should be encouraged to understand that they are witnessing to the faith through all of their social networking, whether ‘public’ or ‘private’.

Many employers and church organizations ask their personnel to consider including a disclaimer on their personal sites, especially if employees/church personnel are highly visible in the community and/or post material related to church work/ministry on their personal sites. One example: ‘The views expressed on this site are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of my employer.’”

There are also several examples where a person has inadvertently tweeted a comment designed for a personal account to the organization’s account causing embarrassment to the employer.

It is also important that organizations ensure proper control and management of any social media accounts that they operate. If there is inadequate control of social media, internal problems and difficulties can become public very quickly and easily. In January 2013, for example, the HMV company in the UK made 60 people redundant but was then subject to criticism on its own Twitter account by disgruntled employees. These criticisms were then picked up and soon became a news story in their own right. Because the management did not really understand social media, they did not know their own Twitter password or how to close the account so were powerless to stop the attacks.

7

Practical Advice for Media Communication

The communications office needs to know all relevant facts

Those dealing with crisis communications have to be involved in all levels of crisis management because they will **need to know all that is going on in order to do their job properly.** They will not be able to manage communications without a clear grasp of the facts and there is nothing more damaging for a communications officer or spokesperson than being told something by a reporter that they didn’t know and ought to have known! Information should be checked and re-checked to ensure that as far as humanly possible it is accurate and up to date.

Collate and write down what is known as fact

If there are, for example, allegations about what someone is supposed to have done in the past, it is necessary to start to put together an accurate chronology. A second task is to write down what immediate steps can and are being taken to deal with the crisis including who needs to be informed and whether they have been contacted. Collate and update information regularly.

Keep an accurate log of media contacts and requests for information

This log should also indicate how these requests were responded to. At an early stage make **a list of all the relevant stakeholders** and indicate when and how they should be informed and by whom.

Make a note of the key messages to be communicated

These messages should be agreed by all involved in managing the crisis and must be adhered to. Key phrases should be written out so that there is no misunderstanding and the messages are consistent. It is also crucial that the messages acknowledge the emotional dimension of the crisis and are expressed accordingly.

Draw up a list of possible scenarios

It is necessary to draw up (and refine as the crisis unfolds) a list of the **possible scenarios** which may occur. This is especially valuable in the case of ‘worst case’ scenarios where the team needs to have contingency measures in reserve in case

The students of a well known Catholic boarding school have gone on strike and smashed the windows and furniture of their dining hall. I am bombarded with phone calls from the media who want to know more. I have no idea what happened, what caused the rumpus. When I phone the headmaster he refuses to talk to me and refers me to Father Superior of the mission who is nervous and angry. Am I also one of those “hostile reporters” who want to spoil the reputation of the Church? Not for the first time I realize that large parts of the Church are scared of the media and hostile to it. I am included in the “media” and also denied information. So I cannot help them. An uninformed information officer is useless.

Fr. Oskar Wermter SJ

any of these events should arise. The scenarios should also envisage what might happen if one or more unrelated crises should emerge at the same time.

Prepare a Question and Answer (Q&A) document

All the questions that could be asked of the organization in relation to crisis scenarios should be listed and possible answers indicated. The question and answer document should be updated throughout the crisis. Compiling this list is a practical way of understanding the scope and nature of the crisis.

It is important that the communications person and the team put themselves in the place of the journalist or other potential recipient of messages and ask the difficult and less obvious questions. The Q&A sheet can be used as a checklist to prepare for interviews and presentation on the crisis. Sometimes a version of the Q&A document is issued to give inquirers the basic facts about what has happened and what is being done.

Put together an initial holding statement

The purpose of the holding statement is to have something to give to the media even though very little may be known. It buys time for the organization to give time to ensure that it is in possession of relevant information and can speak with credibility. **This initial holding statement should only state what is known and should avoid all speculation.** If appropriate it should contain an expression of sorrow or concern for any people who have been harmed. Of course, sometimes the media are slow to pick up on a crisis and the organization then has the chance to decide if, when and how it will issue any statement. In many cases, however, the media (and other stakeholders too) are quickly aware of the situation and are looking for information.

Prepare fuller statements as appropriate

As soon as possible a **fuller statement** should be issued to reassure any victims, stakeholders, the public and the media that the organization is taking appropriate action and are aware of the seriousness and urgency of the situation. Later statements should provide accurate facts and figures to reduce speculation and keep rumours to a minimum. Legal advisers should clear all statements.

Never say “No Comment”

In many cases considerations of confidentiality and privacy or the matter being sub judice will restrict what can be said. In these cases spokespersons have to explain to journalists why they are restricting comments. However, a spokesperson

In April 2003, the Archdiocese of Singapore was confronted with charges against one of its diocesan priests, accused of misuse of parish funds. Very quickly Archbishop Nicholas Chia published a first “Holding Statement”, reflecting the Church’s position in a situation of lack of more concrete information. Nevertheless, this Statement allowed the Church to demonstrate her desire and readiness to communicate quickly and credibly, spelling out the action to be taken.

“We are shocked and deeply saddened by what has happened. However, as the matter is sub judice we cannot comment on the charges. We let the law take its course.

We do not know the circumstances under which the transfers of funds were made or the reasons why Fr K. made those transfers. Until investigations are completed and the full details are known, we are unable to comment on how he was able to transfer large amounts of money.

The current measures in place are that all parishes have to submit monthly statements of receipts and payments, bank statements and bank reconciliation to the Finance Department for checking. Discrepancies are taken up with the parishes concerned immediately.

However, we will be making a review of our accounting system with the assistance of consultants. Should there be any weaknesses in the present system, corrective measures will be taken.

If Fr K. is convicted, he cannot hold a post of responsibility such as Parish Priest. Meanwhile, he will be told to take a leave of absence until the conclusion of his trial.”

About a year later, after the judicial proceedings were completed, the Archbishop published another statement, giving a full report on how the Archdiocese perceived and handled the crisis, including revision of the Church accounting system.⁶

should **never say “No, Comment”**. That is a sure way of arousing suspicion and fuelling speculation. It is also often taken as a tacit admission of guilt!

Never go ‘off the record’

Sometimes journalists will ask for comments or information ‘off the record’. In crises it is essential that communication officers do not reveal sensitive or damaging information or give contradictory messages. It is therefore essential that all comments or statements are ‘on the record’ to minimize the risk of confusion and misunderstanding. In addition, any attempt to manipulate a journalist or ‘spin’ a media story will only result in disaster!

Monitor the media

Throughout the crisis **the news media (including online sites) need to be monitored** on a systematic basis. Such monitoring is vital if the organization is going to have any chance of influencing public opinion. When factual errors occur in the media these should be pointed out as quickly as possible. As was noted

The men and women of the media are just trying to do their work and earn a living. They are colleagues and fellow media workers. They are always welcome in my office. I try to be helpful when they phone me, even though they may interrupt me in my work. We are together in trying to find out the truth and pass correct information on to the public.

“Father, what can you tell me about this priest who was caught at the airport with pornographic material in his suitcase?” It is the voice of a nice young woman who is reporting for the main daily paper. I have met her before, and we got along quite well. I have absolutely no idea what she is talking about. Nobody bothered to inform me, media man of the bishops’ conference, about this highly embarrassing story. I simply tell her so. I know nothing about this. But I do not deny it. I promise to enquire and I will come back to her later. Since she knows me and trusts me, she accepts my assurance. In due course I confirm the story. When the matter comes up in court I tell her that the priest concerned is no longer on active duty and will undergo treatment.

Fr. Oskar Wermter SJ

above, a website can be very useful in putting the organization's case into the public domain and journalists can be directed there for updates on the situation. There may be a tendency in following news coverage to become defensive and angry over 'misreporting'. This needs to be resisted. There has to be an acceptance that **in a crisis 'perception is reality' and the crucial task is to work to improve perceptions.** Angry defensiveness will not help.

Monitor social media

It is very important to monitor social media sites for comment and discussions. Today, it is quite common for individuals or groups to set up special Facebook pages, for example, to campaign on issues. If a Church organization finds itself dealing with a controversial matter, such as the potential closure of a school or the amalgamation of parishes, it is likely that they will find that a group or individual has set up a Facebook page or blog to gather support and post comments. Twitter also needs to be monitored, as many stories, especially the most sensational, will be re-tweeted and commented upon.

Use social media to supplement other channels

Social media can be used creatively to supplement more formal media and internet channels to ensure that important messages are easily accessible to a broader audience. For example, in Canada, the Archdiocese of Edmonton Twitter account is used to keep people informed of the progress of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission set up to deal with the aftermath of physical and sexual abuse in Church residential schools for indigenous peoples. Tweets also link to the blog by the Archbishop, in which he is able to express his own personal reflections on the scandal.⁷

In some cases individuals need to be protected from media interest

They should be taken to a place of care, have counselling or given space to recover from shock. Arrangements may need to be made for neighbours, friends or colleagues to answer the telephone or the door. People should always be clear whom to contact on the crisis team and the press should be politely but firmly directed to seek answers from the designated spokesperson. These situations underline the value of established external links with statutory agencies, local authorities and the media.

Practical advice and guidelines for media communication

- assure that the communications office is aware of all relevant *facts*
- collate and record in writing all known *facts*
- keep an accurate log of media contacts and requests for information
- make a note of key messages to be communicated
- draw up a list of possible scenarios
- prepare a Question and Answer (Q&A) document
- compose an initial *holding* statement
- prepare fuller statements as appropriate
- never say “No Comment”
- never go ‘off the record’
- monitor the media
- where necessary, protect individuals from media interest

8

Conclusion

Badly managed crisis can have extremely damaging repercussions for reputation and credibility. **A crisis well handled, however, is an opportunity for the Church as an institution to recognise and accept that its credibility will have everyday to be won and re-won in the media and among the public.** It has to bear in mind that it is most credible, both to its own adherents and to a wider public, because it is competent, honest, caring and when it is truly able to give its message ‘not only in words but in the whole manner of its life’ (Communio et Progressio No.11).

Endnotes

¹ see “Pope’s Regrets over Statement Fail to Quiet a Storm of Protests”. *New York Times* (19.09.06) <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/09/19/world/europe/19pope.html> – verified March 2015

² see the BBC website for details of the story: “Sharia law in UK is ‘unavoidable’” (07.02.2008) <http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7232661.stm> – verified March 2015

³ Stephen O’Leary: *A Tangled Web: New Media and the Catholic Scandals* (08.06.2002) <http://www.ojr.org/ojr/ethics/1028655580.php> – verified March 2015

⁴ see Tegan Ford: “Making sense of the impact of social media on crisis communication”, (21.11.13) <http://www.prconversations.com/index.php/2013/11/making-sense-of-the-impact-of-social-media-on-crisis-communication/> – verified March 2015

⁵ <http://www.usccb.org/about/communications/social-media-guidelines.cfm> – verified March 2015

⁶ see www.catholic.org.sg/archbishops_corner_announce.php?id=19, www.catholic.org.sg/archbishops_corner_announce.php?id=20 – verified March 2015

⁷ see <http://archbishopsmith.blogspot.co.uk/2014/02/an-invitation.html> – verified March 2015

Further Reading

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Appendix

SAMPLE DIOCESAN CRISIS MANAGEMENT PLAN

Scope of the Crisis Management Plan

The Crisis Management Plan will be put into operation when there is an actual or anticipated event that will or may have adverse consequences for the organization's normal operations or will affect its credibility and public standing.

Potential scenarios include abuse of children or vulnerable adults, parish or school closures or reorganization, scandals involving the clergy or other diocesan staff, criminal activity, financial or administrative mismanagement, employment issues, accidents or natural disasters involving Church staff or property, matters of controversy in the public arena, sexual scandal, church reordering, controversies over the location of churches or other institutions. Some crises may arise from difficulties involving related institutions such as schools, colleges, hospitals, care homes etc. run by religious orders or other Catholic groups.

The Crisis Management Team shall be:

Bishop

Vicar General

Diocesan Communications Officer

Private Secretary

Experts (depending on nature of crisis, e.g. Chancellor, Financial Secretary, Child Protection Officer, legal advisor, representative of religious order or Catholic organization)

Deputies for the above will be _____

Administrative support will be provided for by _____

All media and other public enquiries during the crisis are to be directed to the designated communications spokesperson.

All public statements will be cleared with legal advisers before being issued.

Stakeholders

Potential stakeholders who may need be affected or to be kept informed in a crisis include: clergy, religious, staff, alleged victims, injured, parishes, local communities, local politicians, Church and public authorities, local media, Catholic media, national media etc. A specific checklist will be drawn up in a particular crisis.

When a crisis is anticipated or occurs, the following steps will be taken:

1. Any member of the Crisis Management Team who becomes aware of a crisis unfolding should inform the Bishop or Vicar General.
2. The CMT will meet in _____
(back-up meeting location is _____
when convened by the Bishop/Vicar General).
3. The Bishop /Vicar General ensures that the core team is alerted and that the appropriate legal and other experts have been contacted.
4. The Bishop/Vicar General ensures that any allegation of abuse of children or vulnerable adults is subject to the procedures under the diocesan Child Protection Guidelines.
5. Allegations of criminal wrongdoing will immediately be referred to the police.

Crisis Team

First Meeting

- Share all information and decide what **actions need to be taken immediately.**
- Check that telephones and fax are working and key contact telephone/ fax numbers and email addresses are correct.
- Keep a record of agreed actions and times for completion and assign responsibilities.
- Ensure the telephone is manned. Start log of all calls associated with the crisis, especially those from the media, get details of caller, organization, phone and fax or email. **Remember; do not give statements over the phone. Promise to return the call and to fax or email a statement within a specified time.**
- Determine what facts you know about the crisis. Verify facts where possible. Write down what you know and what you are doubtful of. **Make sure there are no hidden facts which you need to know. Your credibility will collapse if facts emerge later which cast shadow on the honesty and truthfulness of your public statements.**
- Prepare a *holding* statement with supporting questions and answers for any initial enquiries. Enlist outside help if required. Check statement with appropriate experts and legal adviser.
- Identify appropriate media spokesperson or persons. Ensure they are properly trained.
- Decide which stakeholders (e.g.) will need, meetings, letters, statements. Agree how groups and individuals are to be kept informed.
- Decide how external and internal responses to the crisis are to be monitored and by whom.
- Brainstorm possible developments of the crisis. Identify worst case scenarios and decide how these will be dealt with and what media response will be made.

Subsequent meetings as crisis develops and until resolved

- Before the meeting, Bishop/VG should assess development of crisis and check if new members are needed in team.
- Update known facts in the light of developments since the first meeting.
- Review the existing position and press statements. Check the questions and answers. Update where necessary.
- Review state of knowledge of the crisis and any comment made by people within or associated with the organization. Decide if response is necessary.
- Update any external media or other advisers helping with the crisis.
- Agree future actions and timetable.
- Decide on time of next meeting.

Concluding Meeting

Meet and formally evaluate the handling of the crisis.

- Identify current public position and reputation.
- Identify any strengths and weaknesses in the management of the crisis.
- Modify crisis plan as required.
- Check that causes of the crisis are well understood and that any appropriate actions are being or will be taken to minimise the risk of a similar crisis recurring.
- Collect and file all documents relating to the crisis.
- Ensure adequate de-briefing for any people who have been adversely affected by their work on the crisis.

Templates for your individual

**Crisis
Management
Plan**

are available

under

[http://www.cameco.org/english/publications/
cameco-practice-series/](http://www.cameco.org/english/publications/cameco-practice-series/)

