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“WE ASK FOR FORGIVENESS”:
REFLECTION ON THE ABUSE CRISIS IN THE CHURCH
IN PRESS RELEASES

Abstract. The sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church has been a global phenomenon. As with any crisis, it has also revealed a contradiction between what the Church should be and what, at times, it has been. We can consider crises as a painful and traumatic experience, but one that can serve to re-discover the importance and centrality of the values that have been betrayed. In many dioceses, religious congregations and episcopal conferences, the Church has had to communicate to public opinion the existence of these cases, express its sorrow – especially to the victims and their families – and report on the handling of these cases through press releases. By means of a comparative analysis of various press releases issued as a result of these painful cases, we wish to identify the values that dioceses, episcopal conferences and other realities wish to recover, the feelings expressed and other possible patterns that allow us to identify the reflection carried out internally in each case.

Keywords: Sexual abuses; press releases; trust; institutional communication

INTRODUCTION

Much has already been written about the sexual abuse crisis in the Catholic Church, a human drama that has also had negative consequences in many other areas: spiritual, pastoral, relational, reputational, and so on. Since 1985, when the accusations of eleven minors against a parish priest of the diocese of Louisiana (USA) attracted the attention of the American press, the media have paid increasing attention to this type of scandal (Bruni and Burkett, 2002).

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Since then, and in a short time, the public exposure of sexual abuse cases occurring within the Catholic Church has become a global phenomenon that continues to this day (Carroggio, 2021). Among other effects, these tragedies have highlighted a typical contradiction seen in communicational crises: the contrast between what the institution involved should be and what, at times, it has been. Analyzing them from a communicative perspective, we can consider crises as a “forge” of institutional identity: it is a painful and traumatic experience – first for the victims, then for those who trusted the organization, and finally for the institution itself, but it offers an opportunity to rediscover the importance and centrality of the values betrayed, preventing the conditions that facilitate potential future crises.

Before continuing, it is necessary to consider that the Catholic Church is not an organization like any other. With words of St. Cyprian, the Church explains itself as a “sign and instrument both of a very closely knit union with God and of the unity of the whole human race...” (St. Cyprian); in the light of its magisterium, the Church is “the kingdom of Christ now present in mystery” that “grows visibly through the power of God in the world” (*Lumen Gentium*, 4). The fact that its head is Christ and its mission is transcendent are features of the nature of the Church making it unique among other institutions of society (its hierarchical structure, the source of the authority, etc.). The Church must be considered as one complex reality in which the divine and the human coalesce.

Without forgetting this supernatural condition, the members of the Church, while walking the earth, encounter challenges and problems similar to those of other organizations. Even while wanting to imitate the Christ, mistakes, evil and distrust are present and are part of the journey: “The Church on earth is endowed already with a sanctity that is real though imperfect. In her members perfect holiness is something yet to be acquired” (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 825). As Benedict XVI said, “the Church’s greatest persecution does not come from enemies outside, but arises from sin in the Church, and that the Church therefore has deep need to re-learn penance, to accept purification, to learn on the one hand forgiveness, but also the necessity of justice” (Benedict XVI, 2010). Therefore, in the crises that arise from relationships, the Church can be equated – albeit with the limits we have pointed out – with other organizations.

Crises, yes, are an opportunity to be purified; but, at the same time, it is necessary to consider that stakeholders no longer have the same attitude towards the organization. Crises leave an imprint on every relationship. In the case at hand, the Church needs to inspire trust again in order to be in a position to carry out its proposal of salvation once again. Without the intangible of trust, it is

very difficult for an organization based on a proposal of values to fulfill its mission, because it would lack moral authority. Although authority in the Church ultimately refers to God (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1899), it is exercised through human persons who inspire trust or not.

Although trust is a topic that has recently aroused interest in the scientific community due to the crisis that many institutions are undergoing (Edelman, 2023), thinking on this essential component of human relations is not new: Aristotle already addressed it in his *Nicomachean Ethics* (III, 6–9). In academia, it was only in the 1980s that it attracted the interest of specialists in the social sciences and economics (Nooteboom, 2002). In more recent times, such attention has grown because of the increased intertwining between different social actors, brought about by globalization and digital technologies (Bachmann and Zaheer, 2006; Li, 2011; Botsman, 2017), as well as because of the aforementioned crisis.

The fragility of institutions calls for reflection from academia in order to find solutions, since they are for society “like levers: necessary, if we want to achieve something beyond the power of our muscles. Like machines, institutions multiply our power for good and evil” (Popper, 1945). It therefore seems urgent to regain confidence in the usefulness of the organizations that are the backbone of society – among them, the Catholic Church – otherwise the human community will become progressively weaker.

There is no unanimous agreement on the elements that confer trustworthiness, i.e., the ability to inspire confidence. Some proposals from academia have identified the following components: competence, responsibility and care (McAllister, 1995); good intention, honesty and limited opportunism (Cummings and Bromiley, 1996); integrity, intentionality, capability and results (Covey and Merrill, 2008); consistency, clarity, compassion, character, contribution, competence, connection and commitment (Horsager, 2012); authenticity, transparency and consistency (Berman, 2020); experience, coherence and empathy (Folkman, 2022); and so on.

In my opinion (Narbona, 2021), the multiple proposals on the components of trust can be summarized in three values: integrity, capacity and benevolence, which in some way follow the elements that Aristotle proposes to the speaker for his speech to be persuasive, i.e., to generate credibility and inspire the listener (logos, ethos, pathos). In this context of communication, integrity is understood as fidelity to one’s own identity and consistency of behavior with the proposed message; capacity, as the demonstration that one possesses the knowledge and mastery of those skills that allow one to perform a task well; and benevolence, as the desire to contribute to the good of the other party and not only for personal benefit. Any person or institution can find numerous ways

to express these three components in order to be trustworthy. A crisis of trust, on the other hand, occurs when one or more of these ingredients are betrayed, i.e., when inconsistent, incompetent or mendacious behavior or intentionality is revealed.

As is well known, communication must accompany the institution in the healing process (of the victims and of the institution) and in the ability to inspire trust again. As in human relationships, the first words or actions proposed to the other party when a mistake has been made are particularly delicate and sensitive, as they can easily be misinterpreted due to the emotions generated by a crisis (hatred, anger, contempt, alienation, etc.). It happens that, in the moments following a crisis, all the actions and words of the institution, all the initiatives of institutional communication, are always interpreted by the various stakeholders in the light of that crisis.

In many dioceses, congregations and other realities of the Catholic Church, the existence of sexual abuse cases has been communicated to the public by means of press releases, which also expressed sorrow – especially to the victims and their families – and reported on how these cases were being handled. The press release can be understood as the “information product whose purpose is to communicate news about the entity, usually in relation to an event or occurrence, to a wide audience, and to satisfy the public relations needs of the institution” (McLaren and Gurău, 2008). It is a document that an institution addresses to both the public and internal audiences, and is inspired by the values and expresses the culture of that entity. It informs about what the institution does, what it is, and what it wishes to be.

The press release can be considered as the paradigm of vulnerable communication, because it conveys the voice of the institution at times when it must expose all its fragility. “In case of crisis, the press release is mainly used to inform the public through the media what the company is doing and how they are going to solve the crisis situation” (Choi and Park, 2011). They are documents in which the weight and value of each word is measured, and which contribute to generate the informative framework in which a problem will be narrated in the media. They are usually the first institutional voice after the crisis, so we can consider them as the first step taken by an organization to regain the trust of its public. It is the beginning of a process, where the relationship between the agents involved is weakened by the circumstances. It is easy for any mistake to increase distrust. Because of the interest of this communicative act, in this article we propose to analyze various press releases as an institutional response to a crisis, in order to improve relations with their audiences. Similar analyses

exist, such as those carried out before the Exxon-Valdez (Fearn-Banks, 2016) and BP (Choi, 2012) crises, among others.

METHODOLOGY

To this end, 30 press releases issued following allegations of abuse cases against priests or religious of the Catholic Church were analyzed. The selection criterion was, on the one hand, chronological (cases communicated to the public between February 2017 and February 2022) and geographical (relevant dioceses on the five continents), to avoid focusing on a specific ecclesial community. Many other cases could have been selected, but for the first study 30 seemed sufficient. In the selected chronological period, sensitivity within the Church to the seriousness of this problem greatly increased. For example, in February 2019, an international meeting was held at the Holy See on “The Protection of Minors in the Church”, a topic hitherto unheard of in a Vatican context and a sign of this change of attitude.

Among the Church organizations that in those years recognized to manage denunciations were selected 25 dioceses (Pennsylvania, Barcelona, Lisbon, Los Angeles, Lyon, Marseille, Melbourne, Boston, Milan, Rome, Sidney, Turin, Austin, Genoa, New York, Valencia, Madrid, Toulouse, Granada, Paris, Washington, Madrid, Dublin, Paris, Parramatta) and 4 religious congregations (Salesians, Hospitallers, Marists, Vincentians).

The quantitative and qualitative analysis of the texts was carried out using Atlas.ti software. In the press releases, up to 9 arguments were identified that could easily be associated with one of the three elements that inspire trust – integrity, ability or benevolence. These phrases or arguments were a clear manifestation of inspiring one of these three elements. Finally, after analyzing the 30 documents, it has been possible to identify some elements common to most of them, and to compose a text that gathers and summarizes the essentials of the statements analyzed.

RESEARCH RESULTS

The following table shows the arguments grouped according to the ingredient of trustworthiness with which we have associated them, as well as the number of references found in the 30 communications.

Table 1. Values and arguments linked to trust in press releases of the analysis

Trust component	Arguments	Question	References
Integrity	Values	Does it talk about the values that should guide the institution?	52
Integrity	Voice	Does the institution take responsibility for the statement?	27
Integrity	Accused	What is said about the accused? Is he/she mentioned?	26
Capacity	Action	Is any remedial or preventive action noted?	47
Capacity	Protocols	Is there any mention of a prevention or action protocol?	24
Capacity	Acusation	Is the accusation clearly identified?	22
Benevolence	Empathy	Is closeness to the victims expressed?	31
Benevolence	Feeling	Is pain or regret expressed?	16
Benevolence	Victims	What is said about the victims? Are they expressly mentioned?	26

The following are some relevant comments resulting from the qualitative analysis:

– Values (52): The construction of organizational identity presupposes some reference values. The most frequently cited in the documents analyzed – and which, in some cases, are presented as the betrayed values they wish to recover – are: commitment, transparency, seriousness in the struggle, justice, security, responsibility, protection. Only in one case is there a spiritual reference in the text (“We entrust ourselves to the mercy of God and ask for the guidance of the Spirit,” press release of the Congregation of the Mission, Vincentian Fathers, 12 July 2018). Reference values are the element that abounds most in the communiqués.

– Voice (27): Institutions always introduce the press release by attributing their authorship and responsibility for what is said in it (e.g., “The diocese of...”). In isolated cases, they are signed by the bishop or superior.

– Accused (26): There are divergences on how to refer to the person denounced. In general, they are generic references (“a priest”, “one of its members”), although on four occasions actual data (name and pastoral assignment) of the alleged abuser are given.

– Action (47): In order to inspire confidence, it is desired to demonstrate the ability to do things well with a proposal of actions. However, in the texts studied, general promises predominate (“We will do everything possible to give support”; “We place ourselves at your disposal to help”; “We will collaborate

with the civil authorities”). Exceptionally, concrete proposals are offered (offer of a hotline for survivors of abuse, an invitation to denounce through a specific channel to those who have more information, etc.).

– Protocol (24): The existence of an action or prevention protocol is a demonstration of prudent management. However, in the communiqués it is surprising how many entities do not consider their protocols to be definitive (“we are working on the implementation of preventive measures”). In many cases, they are not even mentioned.

– Accusation (22): Out of prudence, accusations are not very detailed, and a generic “sexual abuse” abounds. The case is rarely qualified as “alleged”.

– Empathy (31): Benevolence, interest in the other, is cultivated with empathy. Institutions try to cultivate it with the addressees by asking for forgiveness, lending a listening ear and showing support.

– Sentiment (16): With possible mentions to the pain experienced by the evil caused, the organization can show itself close. However, it is not a resource that abounds in our analysis. Some expressions used are: “deeply saddened”, “deep consternation”, “we feel sadness and shame”, “strong condemnation”, “sincere apologies” or “we strongly condemn”.

– Victims (26): Victims are in the communiqués a generic group referred to as “minors and vulnerable persons”. In many cases, institutions lengthen their request for forgiveness to “victims and their families”. Sometimes they are considered as “survivors”.

The text below shows the extracts wishing to demonstrate capacity, integrity and benevolence. In my view, it is clear that the institution wishes to repair the damaged relationship and inspire trust again.

COMMUNICATION FROM (NAME OF THE INSTITUTION)

The (name of the institution) has received a complaint of alleged sexual abuse committed by [accused’s clerical status and time of year]. The complaint has been filed with the appropriate civil authorities and [Capacity] a canonical investigation has been initiated.

[Capacity] The (name of the institution) takes any allegation of sexual abuse very seriously and cooperates fully with civil authorities at all times.

[Integrity] We are committed to protecting minors and vulnerable persons and to working for a culture of safety and respect in all our communities.

[Benevolence] We apologize to the victim and all those affected by this case. We place ourselves at their disposal to listen and attend to their needs and to collaborate in whatever is necessary to repair the damage caused.

[Integrity] We wish to reiterate our commitment to transparency and accountability and, in this regard, [Capacity] we inform that we are working on the implementation of preventive and protective measures to ensure the safety of all people in our communities.

Sincerely, (name of the institution)

CONCLUSIONS

The study carried out can help us draw some conclusions, which we propose below:

Although crises will never be absent in the life of institutions and no one wants them because they can cause a great deal of damage, they are also an opportunity to reflect on one's own identity and to correct one's course. As has been shown, crises help draw public attention to an aspect of institutional identity that has been betrayed. Institutions must be careful not to immediately hide the wound, but rather accept that they have neglected an aspect of their essence that turns out to be fundamental and positive (in the case of the Church, the dignity of people). In this case, the mission of the Church – which is to generate unity with God and among men – has also been hurt. The ability to generate unity is also a positive value that must be recovered.

In addition, it has been shown that communication plays an important role in the work of legitimizing the organization once it has lost its reputation. Publicly addressing society with a press release, taking the initiative in providing data about the case and becoming a source of information are undoubtedly ways of accepting the responsibility that may exist in each case and expressing the desire to do good for new.

This article has also proposed the concept of *vulnerable communication*, that is, the communication that is carried out when an organization appears fragile and fallible. In these situations, the press release has proven to be a good format to start talking again and one of the first initiatives needed to inspire confidence in one's own audiences. The first communicative action after a crisis is always the most delicate. The style of press releases allows us to be objective and emphasize the facts. Through this format the institution not only informs that it can also try to make its first assessment (of pain and remorse, as we have seen in all cases).

In order to continue being a relevant social actor, any institution needs to inspire trust. Also the Church and its supernatural message, even if it does so in the name of God. In the article we have seen that press releases contain the three elements with which reliability is built, that is, the ability to inspire trust: the desire for integrity, the ability to do things well, and the benevolence of those who wish to work in the service of others. Only by putting the person at the center, and not the institution, will the Church be able to inspire trust.

The number of references to the importance of integrity stands out, and specifically to the betrayed values that are proposed as a guide for the ecclesial community. There are also numerous references to the organization’s ability to repair damage (especially through protocols). Finally, benevolence is expressed in particular with phrases of pain that show empathy towards the victims and their families. One of the most surprising conclusions, however, has been the almost non-existent presence of supernatural or spiritual references that would be typical of the nature of this type of reality.

Inspiring trust in an institution is a slow and laborious journey, yet essential. The Catholic Church proposes a message of salvation and knows that it is supported by God, but it is also composed of men and is addressed to all humanity. Good communication seems to be a necessary condition for trust to be the path to faith for many.

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„PROSIMY O PRZEBACZENIE”:
REFLEKSJA NAD KRYZYSEM NADUŻYĆ W KOŚCIELE
W KOMUNIKATACH PRASOWYCH

Streszczenie

Kryzys nadużyć seksualnych w Kościele katolickim jest zjawiskiem globalnym. Jak każdy kryzys, ujawnił rozbieżność pomiędzy tym, czym Kościół powinien być a czym niekiedy jest. Kryzys możemy traktować jako dotkliwie i traumatyczne doświadczenie, które jednak może służyć ponownemu odkryciu znaczenia i przywróceniu centralnej pozycji naruszonym wartościom. Wiele diecezji i konferencji biskupów było zmuszonych poinformować opinię publiczną o istnieniu przypadków nadużyć, wyrazić swój żal – zwłaszcza wobec ofiar i ich rodzin – oraz przekazać wiadomość o podjętych działaniach za pośrednictwem komunikatów prasowych. Poprzez analizę porównawczą licznych informacji dla mediów dotyczących tych bolesnych sytuacji, w artykule podjęto próbę zidentyfikowania wartości, jakie diecezje, konferencje episkopatu i inne środowiska pragną odzyskać, wyrażanych uczuć oraz innych możliwych schematów pozwalających określić refleksję podjętą wewnątrz każdej z przywołanych instytucji.

Słowa kluczowe: nadużycia seksualne; komunikaty prasowe; zaufanie; komunikacja instytucjonalna