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There's no business like the PR business

Bill Tammeus | Aug. 8, 2012 A small c catholic

As a pure-hearted journalist whose salary has always been paid out of vending box proceeds and not from ad sales, I?ve always had some disdain for sin-stained people in the public relations business.

Unlike those of us true journalists who stood resolutely for truth, justice and the American way, I saw PR people as tainted by corporate greed and a willingness to shade the truth all the way to blackout if need be.

The first two paragraphs here are, of course, delusional fiction dipped in a wishful-thinking idealism that described a reality that has never existed, no matter how much I longed for it.

In the real world, even saints sometimes need PR help. And the Vatican under Pope Benedict XVI has proven again and again that its in-house PR skills are close to zero. For proof, one need look only at how the hierarchy has handled a host of disastrous developments chronicled recently in this *NCR* piece Analysis: The Vatican's 'Next Generation' PR maneuver [1] by John L. Allen Jr. -- from the 2006 Regensburg speech to a Holocaust-denying bishop to the international sexual abuse scandal to Vatileaks to the ham-handed way officials have dealt with the Leadership Conference of Women Religious and on and on.

Even as these matters were unfolding, I said in various venues that the Vatican would do well to get some professional help so that someone is giving at least a little thought to how what the pope and others are saying in public will be received.

So, despite my natural inclination to be wary of what Hollywood used to call publicity agents, I applaud the Vatican for hiring a journalist to provide some help.

No doubt it?s possible to argue that American journalist Greg Burke [2] was much too safe a choice for the pope, given that Burke is leaving a job at FOX News (widely known to be a propaganda machine for Republicans) and that he is an Opus Dei numerary [3]. But Burke has considerable respect among serious journalists and, besides, did you think B-16 was going to call in the currently available Keith Olbermann or, say, Hans Küng?

In the 40 full-time years I spent as a reporter and columnist, I came to appreciate good PR people (no matter how I began this column). Not only would they answer direct questions on behalf of their clients but the best of them would be the first to tell you about some bad news happening with those clients.

Burke surely knows that it?s much better to be ahead of the story, giving, in his new situation, the church a chance to tell its story in its own way rather than reacting to bad news turned up by others.

His problem is that there have been so many damaging stories in recent years about so many subjects that he?s got a lot of catching up to do even while he tries to stay ahead of whatever is coming next.

In the best of all possible worlds, of course, nothing damaging would be coming next because the church would

be so busy proclaiming the gospel in word and deed that it would have no opportunity for further scandal, missteps or untrustworthy butlers.

But we all know that the human beings who make up both the leadership and the followership of the Catholic church are capable of both error and evil, as are all human beings everywhere, even us Presbyterians.

So Greg Burke will have to juggle a lot. And because he comes to this position on the heels of so many PR miscues, it?s unlikely he?ll have much room for error. Yes, he will be expected to put a Vatican spin on whatever he says, but the first time he?s found deceiving journalists and the public he?s pretty much finished.

Offering verifiable truth after verifiable truth is the only way to inoculate himself against such an avoidable end.

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