

Trying to solve the church's communications problem

John L. Allen Jr. | Sep. 18, 2010 NCR Today

By JOHN L. ALLEN JR.

London

Complaining about the church's PR operation is a favorite Catholic indoor sport, but the U.K. is home to one of the more creative recent efforts to do something about it. "Catholic Voices" was launched in the run-up to the papal visit in order to offer a stable of informed young lay Catholics to media outlets, ready and eager to comment on all things Catholic.

The group's tongue-in-cheek motto is that "we're media-friendly, studio-ready and ego-free," meaning no one will get upset if an interview has to be cancelled or cut short because the news has moved on.

"Catholic Voices" is the brainchild of two prominent lay Catholics in England: Jack Valero, director of Opus Dei in the U.K. and the press officer for the beatification of Cardinal John Henry Newman; and Austen Ivereigh, a former spokesperson for Cardinal Cormac Murphy-O'Connor of Westminster and now a Catholic journalist and commentator. The two collaborated back in 2006 on what they called the "Da Vinci Code Response Team," identifying people who could answer questions, however off-the-wall, raised by the Dan Brown potboiler.

They got the idea for "Catholic Voices" after a London debating society called "Intelligence Squared" sponsored a debate last year on the motion, "The Catholic Church is a force for good in the world." The opposition was led by Christopher Hitchens and the actor Stephen Fry, while the pro-Catholic voices were Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Nigeria and Ann Widdecombe. By all accounts, the Catholic side was routed, creating no small degree of panic among British Catholics about who would speak for them during the papal trip.

"Catholic Voices" is independent of the Catholic bishops' conference in England and Wales, though they enjoy a good relationship with the official communications channels. Their aim is not to offer authoritative church statements, but to field ordinary lay Catholics who can speak about the church's faith and life.

I sat down today with Ivereigh to talk about "Catholic Voices," what he makes of Benedict's trip so far, and the perennial problem of Vatican communications.

What is Catholic Voices?

It's a project to create a team of speakers, give them media skills training, and make them available to studios now during the papal visit.

Is it going to survive the papal visit?

That's what everyone is asking. People are saying this is brilliant, we've revived apologetics in the era of 24-hour news. We're getting e-mails every day from people who have seen Catholic Voices on the TV saying this is fantastic. Is there any way you could extend it nationally? Is there any way my diocese can take part? There's

clearly a demand for it to continue, so there will be a future for Catholic Voices, though quite what that future will be is yet to be worked out.

What we need to do is to reflect on this experience, how well it went and what we can learn from it, and then think about the future. Of course the future will require funding, where it will come from and so on. Without a papal visit on the horizon, will there be the same generosity we've had from this team?

What made you decide to do this?

You know the story that about a year ago, we had the Intelligence Squared debate. Jack went to that and was shaking his head, I had my head in my hands. We knew the papal visit was coming and that the church was going to be under the spotlight.

This was the debate with Christopher Hitchens and Archbishop John Onaiyekan of Nigeria?

It was a massacre. They started out about sixty percent against the motion and they ended up being 95 percent against it or something like that. The motion was "the Catholic Church is a force for good in the world," so it wasn't exactly hard-hitting.

That debate led to all sorts of conversations, especially because it was around that time the papal visit was announced. It was the coincidence of those two things. The debate also led to a cri de coeur, in the Catholic papers particularly, of where are the articulate Catholics, where are the public intellectuals who can take a stand? Why don't we have debaters of the quality of Stephen Fry and Christopher Hitchens?

We have Catholics like Ann Widdecombe who are very good at a certain kind of response. But when you're taking on atheists, secularists and humanists, there's a certain language you need to speak. Because of the upcoming papal visit, the question for us was, who are the Catholics they're going to go to?

You were looking for people who could go toe-to-toe with the Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens of the world?

Actually, no. What we wanted to do was to create a team that would make itself available to studios. It was really conceived as a means of filling the chairs in the studios during the visit. But we also knew that there would be debates, and there have been, and we thought some of these Catholic voices would be good for that. Primarily, it's a media project.

You put this in the plural, "Catholic Voices." How do you define a Catholic voice?

We came up with a selection procedure. We had about ninety who applied, which amazed us actually, because it wasn't widely publicized. From that, we whittled them down to about 45. There were some basics: We need them to be available every two weeks in London, they needed to be in or near London because this is where the studios are, criteria like that, and we got to 45.

We subjected those 45 to a ten-minute interview each, beginning with an as-live BBC or CNN type three-minute interview with real presenters. We judged them on that, and then generally on what we called their "presentability," or presentation skills.

The third criterion was Catholicity, which is where the controversy arises. We defined it in two ways. We wanted people, obviously, who are regular Mass-goers, but also who are part of the church in lots of ways. They might belong to a church organization, but in some way they just understand and know the church. The second thing was that they have to be comfortable with all aspects of church teaching, comfortable enough to put the

church's view across in a way that doesn't make them squirm. Interestingly, that did automatically exclude people who are critical of the bishops from either side.

A Lefebvrite, for example, wouldn't pass the Catholicity test?

We didn't get an application from a Lefebvrite. We did get a few from what you would call the "Taliban Catholics," who of course have become very vociferous on the blogosphere in the last few years. They're very critical of the bishops for compromising too much with modernity and not promoting Catholic truth as they see it. We also had applications from people in favor of the ordination of women, and who in general believe that the reforms of Vatican II have been insufficiently implemented, and who are angry at the bishops for the opposite reasons.

We had one application from a woman called Pat Brown, who made it to an interview because we didn't quite understand where she was coming from. In the interview she said, I believe in the ordination of women and I want to use this, when the pope is here, as a vehicle for talking about that. We said that's not really right for us, and we explained. She got very upset, which led to the formation of what's called "Catholic Voices for Reform." It's slightly annoying they took our name!

The other criterion we used was age. We were deliberately looking for people in their twenties and thirties. In fact we have one who's 45, but mostly they're in that age range. We had people quite angry about that, but it was a very deliberate choice because we wanted to counter-balance the current crop of those Catholics who appear in the media, who tend to be older because they're either established commentators or heads of church organizations. We didn't want professional Catholics. We wanted ordinary people with ordinary jobs who are also committed Catholics, because we felt this was the group the media never hears from. These are people the media doesn't know about, and they wouldn't be called because they're not connected. It was a very deliberate plan to put that kind of Catholic on the scene.

These are not members of the chattering classes?

Absolutely not. They were green in media terms.

Have you tracked the frequency with which these people are appearing?

It's like trying to catch raindrops at the moment. We set out to try to record both radio and TV and put it up on our web site, but it's been impossible in the last few days because there's been so much. In the evaluation we're all going to be self-critical about that. We needed one person actually just to record.

We actually started much earlier than we thought we would, because the demand started earlier. In the last three or four weeks it's been heavy, becoming heavier the closer it got. I don't know for sure, but we're certainly over a hundred radio and TV appearances. That covers everything from local radio to the "Today" program on Radio Four, and it covers everything from some obscured TV station nobody's ever heard of up to News 24 and News at Ten and News Night and so on.

Do you give these people talking points?

No. Between March and July, we met on average every two weeks for a very through briefing on a hot-button issue where the church and society clash, and where people find church positions baffling or scandalous even. In the briefing sessions, my job was to prepare them by giving them lots of information but also giving them links to articles so they could really think about it beforehand. I'd ask a series of questions, the kinds of questions they would be asked, and ask them to form their own views.

Then we had an expert whom I would invite to address the Catholic voices, the team. I would say to the expert, and this discomfited some of them who are used to giving lectures, that you've only got five minutes and you're addressing three million people. What is it you want to get across? They'd make their points, and the Catholic voices would then grill them with the kinds of questions they thought they would face.

That session finished, and then we would spend 15 or 20 minutes doing what we called 're-framing.' We'd ask where the criticism was coming from, looking for what we called the 'positive intention.' What is the value to which the criticism is appealing? To what extent is the criticism here because of a misunderstanding about what the church actually says, or indeed where the church has put it across in language that leaves people confused. In other words, is there a problem of understanding, or is there a genuine clash between the church's anthropological vision and a secular one? Where this is that clash, how do we communicate the church's position in a way that isn't necessarily aimed at persuading people, but so they at least understand where we're coming from. That re-framing session would lead to a series of points which I would then send off to them, collecting the key things.

These were quite long and intense session. We also did role-plays, so we got them interviewing each other.

What was the hardest issue to handle in those sessions?

The two thorniest ones were homosexuality, and AIDSs and condoms.

Not the sexual abuse crisis?

In a strange way the sex abuse issue was more straightforward, in that the failures of the church are a matter of record. What the church has done since, and in particular this pope, are not as well known. When we were briefing on this was exactly when the European crisis was spreading, and so we concentrated on the pope's specific role. What Benedict knew or didn't know before 2001, what he did in 2001, and what he's done since. It was complex, because we had to get into the *motu proprio* of 2001, the updating of the 1962 document, and the whole confusion with canon law and civil law. It was certainly complicated, but it wasn't the hardest.

In the case of AIDS and condoms, we had a briefing by Fr. Michael Czerny [director of the African Jesuits AIDS Network], who came over from Rome. He took what I think is a very beautiful pastoral approach, which was to lay out very clearly what the church is doing in Africa. That was enormously helpful for them to know, that they church speaks with real experience.

On the issue of AIDS and condoms, as you know it's the view of some moral theologians that if a condom is used with the intention of preventing death then it's not contraception, and therefore not prohibited by *Humanae Vitae*. That's been the subject of very vigorous discussion, and this pope set up a special commission of theologians who in the end decided not to conclude. In other words, it wasn't a settled question. Czerny's approach was that the church actually doesn't say to a married couple where one is infected and the other isn't, you can never use condoms to prevent infection. What it does is accompany them in that very difficult ethical decision. He went on to say that obviously abstinence is the safest policy and that's what the church generally urges.

In other words, he presented quite a different picture from the one that's often presented. Some in the group were delighted to hear that, and others were quite discomfited. We spent some time on that. In the end, we concluded that for most of the discussions we were going to have on TV and radio, it was never going to get that complex, and that the very complexity of it is sort of a disadvantage. We settled on saying, the church urges abstinence for very good practical reasons as well as moral theological reasons.

The other thorny issue was homosexuality. Obviously we had to deal with the "disordered" language, and references to "legalization of evil" when it comes to same-sex adoption. Also, we had to deal with the question of what are gay people actually called to? Obviously they're called to chastity, because the only place for sex is within marriage. But are they called to love, for example? It caused a bit of discussion. It's one of those cases in which I don't think there's really a settled view within the church. I suppose one of the things these sessions did was expose those areas where, within the clear teachings of the church, there are obviously different opinions about things. It was important in all these briefing sessions to work out what Augustine said: "In what is essential, unity; in what isn't, difference; and in all things, charity." On the whole, the purpose of these sessions was to clarify church teaching so they're absolutely clear, because the primary mission of Catholic Voices is to communicate clearly, effectively, and in simple human language the teaching of the church to people who are unaccustomed to it, within the context of a fast-moving and usually short broadcast interview.

The aim is understanding, not persuasion?

In some cases. Let's take the exclusion of women from the priesthood. To a society which thinks that is simply discriminatory, it's quite hard to persuade people. What you can talk about is the long tradition of the church and all the other roles women play. On other issues, you can safely assume that most people actually don't know what the church teaches, or it has this whole zone of teaching which is unfamiliar. In those cases, you are aiming to persuade, because you can take their positive intention "you can say you care about rights, you care about justice, let me tell you what the church teaches.

Example?

The church's role worldwide in promoting the rights of the elderly, the unborn, immigrants " the whole Catholic social vision is unfamiliar to many of the people listening to the radio or watching TV, and by the way, was unfamiliar to most of the Catholic voices.

In addition to preparing people to do media work, have you also stumbled across a model for adult faith formation?

Whatever we do about the speakers and media training, we want to create some kind of forum, almost an academy, for Catholic public intellectuals. The relationships we've formed with the experts have been enormously helpful. They've been delighted, because the idea has so appealed to people.

I think what the pope has been saying in these days, in these speeches, underscores the need for something like this. There's been a constant summons to the lay faithful to take their place in the public square. That's the great theme of this visit, to combat aggressive secularism and so on. How do we obey the pope's call through Catholic Voices? It is really about reviving the art of apologetics.

How do you think the trip is going?

I think it's going fantastically. I knew the incredibly negative coverage before he arrived was actually doing us a favor. I knew that the pope would defy people's expectations, because he always does that. But I've been amazed by how successful it has been. One of the newspaper editorials today said, "British people are listening with curiosity and respect." Before the trip began, I said I would judge its success by one criterion only " did people listen? I think they are listening. There are obviously people who are going to listen and then disagree, but I think he's struck a chord.

Now, this visit comes at a very propitious time politically. When this visit was first announced by the previous government, the common agenda between the government and the Holy See was all about international

development and poverty. It's been fascinating to see how the new government has reframed the visit, keeping that but adding the contributions of faith to building community. It's David Cameron's 'Big Society' agenda, which really comes from Philip Blond, the author of Red Tory, who is a disciple of John Milbank. I recently saw them both in Rimini [the annual gathering of the Communion and Liberation movement in Italy]. Blond told the audience that his ideas had been formed by coming to Rimini over the last four years. Of course, Rimini is Catholic civil society in action and on display, it's really impressive. So, there you have Cameron's chief advisor, who's created the idea of the 'Big Society,' getting it from the Catholic social teaching and subsidiarity on display in Rimini.

It may be going better than expected, but do you think the trip will have lasting impact?

Just before the pope arrived, Baroness Warsi, the chairman of the Conservative Party, gave a speech to Anglican Bishops which was obviously designed and timed and crafted to coincide with the visit. She basically said to these bishops, look, under us you are going to have much more recognition, you're going to have more importance, you are the 'Big Society.' In other words, she was affirming faith as being essential to the 'Big Society' vision. So, I think the trip has already had an impact.

Of course, the background to this visit is 2007 and the controversy over adoption agencies [whether church-run adoption agencies that receive public funding could refuse to serve gay couples.]. That sent a chill down the spine of the bishops. Suddenly they realized they could no longer depend on the state to value religious freedom, by which we mean what the pope said at the end of his Westminster Hall address 'the freedom to create associations, and to allow those associations to both witness to their values and to receive public funds as long as they serve the common good and don't restrict the rights of others. I think the agenda of this visit was decided by that, and laid out in what the pope said to the English bishops back in January. Of course, we know the bishops' conference has tremendous input into those talks.

I always knew the Westminster Hall address would go straight to that issue, but it amazed me that almost the very first words were straight on. The message has been constant. The whole thing is a massive argument, the greatest argument this country has ever seen, against secularism.

Is it making any difference?

Paradoxically, I think in a way the battle has already been won because of the change in government. The new government recognizes the importance of civil society, and also realizes how sorely the Catholics felt about 2007. The political ground has already shifted more in the direction of what the bishops wanted to see.

Of course, the argument with secularism takes place at many different levels. At the wider level, in terms of public opinion and the media, that's what this visit is about.

Having said that, it's important to add that the 'Big Society' vision has not yet been tested. The test will come precisely when we get a whole new set of equality regulations, which again threaten the viability of a faith organization. How are they going to choose? This government is also very committed to gay rights. My gut sense, however, is that what happened in 2007 is not going to happen again.

So in a phrase, this trip is both confirming and deepening a new openness to faith in the public sphere?

That's exactly how I'd put it. I think Westminster Hall was fantastically symbolic. The power of the event was amazing. Andrew Brown wrote this morning that it's the end of the 'Protestant nation.' I think that's an exaggeration, but there's a lot in that.

Let's talk about the British press. You heard the pope gently chide the British press, reminding them of their global influence and the importance of being responsible. My impression has been that coverage of religion in the British press is often remarkably sloppy, including a high tolerance level for basic factual

errors. Do you agree?

Yes.

Why is that?

Often the really bad stories are the ones about the Catholic church, and to begin I think that's because the church, almost uniquely in modern society, is capable of saying things that rub people the wrong way. Second, they often have the effect of rubbing two groups of people the wrong way: One is Anglicans, and other is secular people. So, I think editors judge that the Catholic church can be put in a negative light quite safely.

Also, I think there isn't the groundswell of basic, core respect for the faith which you find in the United States or other countries of Europe. There is a kind of cynicism about faith. I don't want to make too much out of journalists being members of a liberal metropolitan elite, because there's danger in going down that road, but actually there's truth to it. If you look at the profile of most journalists, they do belong to that, they tend to be younger, they tend to be free-thinking types and so on. Also, you're dealing often with young people are stupendously ignorant about religion. It's possible to be ignorant about religion in Britain in a way that would not be excusable about sport or politics.

I suppose that makes your project all the more important.

In a way, Catholic Voices was specifically created to be that lonely, very isolated voice in the wind.

To be fair, a lot of my dealings are with the BBC, and I think the BBC needs to be singled out from your general criticism. It has its own particular weaknesses with reporting on religion. They don't have a religion editor, as they do for example for economics, and then there's the obsession with impartiality. For example, yesterday at Twickenham [a rally for the pope with Catholic school children], the BBC was telling me that their editorial line was going to be that this would remind victims of their suffering. That's because it was such good news ? young children, music, joy, and they immediately felt uncomfortable. How are we going to report this in an even-handed way?

Finally, if you could tell the Vatican one thing to clean up its communications act, what would it be?

Make sure that the pope's spokesperson meets regularly with the pope and sees his speeches beforehand. That's why it worked very well with Joaquin Navarro-Valls and why it doesn't work now with Fr. Federico Lombardi. I think that's the fundamental problem. Now I think communications is seen as something that gets involved after the Secretariat of State is finished with it.

My experience in communications in the church is that there is a very powerful tension between what one might call, in British terms, the 'civil service' mentality of the bishops' conference secretariat or the Curia, and the demands of the modern media, the importance of communicating quickly and effectively and spotting the way a story is going to go. That's just a natural tension. The former want the media to go away and they regard it as a good week if the church hasn't appeared in the story at all. The latter say the church needs to be present at least once in order to be making an effect on the national conversation. The former will say, we'll give you a quote next Tuesday when we've consulted two policy documents and a bishop. The latter say, look, I understand you've got a deadline at 5:00 this afternoon, and I'm going to make sure you've got a really good quote to hammer in there to prevent the story from going in that direction.

Now, I think that tension is intrinsic to the church ? probably to any organization, but I can speak with authority about the church, so it's present in the Vatican, it's present in the bishops' conference. In the case of John Paul and Navarro, the civil service deeply resented Navarro's role. Under John Paul, the tension was resolved in

favor of the communicator. Under this pope it's been resolved in favor of the Secretariat of State, with disastrous results for communications.

John Allen will be filing reports throughout the Papal visit to the U.K. Sept. 16-19. Stay tuned to [NCR Today](#) [1] for updates.

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