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The media is not the message

by Phyllis Zagano

Just Catholic
Conclave 2013

Now that the Academy Awards are over, we can turn the dial and watch the papal election. They look pretty similar on the flat screen, even down to the red shoes.

The television production of the Academy Awards -- the "Oscars" -- was impossibly B-movie crass. Meaningless commentary filled the red carpet hours as celluloid luminaries complained of hunger and everybody talked about what they were wearing. Forget the show's "humor." The whole thing was not unlike ancient Rome shortly before its fall.

And now televised coverage of the Vatican has replaced "Downton Abbey" as the favored soap opera. Benedict XVI's resignation and the lead-up to his replacement now include minute conclave details and juicy tidbits from the scandal du jour. Opining clerics fill the screens. Live from Rome, it's ... what?

Please, everybody, tweet the cardinals: It is not about the media; it's about the Gospel.

Somehow the church's managers have decided that media -- including social media -- are the way to battle secularism. Hence the embarrassing photographs of Benedict XVI, a man of unparalleled erudition, tweeting platitudes via iPad.

Such is the new evangelization? I think the old evangelization was just fine, thank you. Of course, that required live people getting next to live people. Not by the hundreds or hundreds of thousands, but as Dorothy Day once recommended, personally, one by one. Some proponents of the new evangelization think bigger audiences and bigger screens will save the day and curb the secular onslaught. But that is not what religion -- any religion -- is about.

Religion centers on its Scriptures, lived by rules and celebrated with liturgy. The Christian message is clearly better lived than spoken about. Spreading the Gospel through media only helps when there is content beyond words. Show me the soup kitchen and the AIDS hostel. Introduce me to the hospital chaplain and the spiritual director. Demonstrate the works of Catholic charities, don't just ask for money. Connect these words and pictures to the stories Jesus told about how to live and how to love. That is what you can push through the airwaves. That is preaching via media.

The Christian message is measured by moments, not by kilowatts. To watch the current show on television, it's all about the official church. And the official church has got its black-robed back up, changing nothing, hearing no one. Their message -- true or not, but how it is framed by media -- begins and ends with "no." That's not all they say, but that is all that is heard.

On top of that, no matter how you cut it, celibate males control the church. There's nothing wrong with celibacy, but you'd think they could open it up a little. A vacancy in the See of Peter was once filled by election, and the electors were the neighboring bishops, the clergy (married or not) and the faithful of Rome.

That won't happen this time, and things will go on the way they have for the last 900 years or so. The most elderly fraction of church clerics -- of 209 cardinals, 117 are under 80 -- those with the least understanding of modern media will choose one of their number to get the See of Rome and the red shoes.

But stop. Let's face it: The church is in a mess. If anyone clicks those red shoes, will it all be better? I read about the two cardinals -- the blind Indonesian and the accused Scot -- who are staying home. How many others should demonstrate some integrity? How many other cardinals -- and bishops and priests crowding in on the action -- should just stay home?

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And what if those clicking red shoes were high-heeled? It doesn't have to be a cardinal, you know. There's no real danger of pink smoke signaling a woman pope, but others who are not cardinals have the skill sets to run the messy Curia and to preach the Gospel. Remember, they used to choose bishops from among the deacons. And women were -- and with a tweaking of the law can again be -- deacons.

The Gospel message properly delivered fuels hope around the world. The good people of Catholicism, of Christianity, of every religion and belief system are watching this election. It's not exactly like the Academy Awards, but it does look like them, with real and made-for-television news, leaked scandals, off-the-record commentary. That alone sends the wrong message.

Controlling the message means living it. What the world -- let alone the church -- needs is someone who will take the words of Scripture and put them into practice. No matter who, it needs to be someone who lives the Gospel.

Could somebody please put a note on every seat in the Sistine Chapel and tell them to elect the one who focuses on the message, not the media?

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(with Gary Macy and William T. Ditewig), (Paulist Press).]

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