

THE MEDIA AND SEXUAL ABUSE CASES ELEMENTS OF A MEDIA PLAN

by Monsignor Francis Maniscalco

Among the principles for dealing with accusations of sexual abuse by priests that were enunciated in June 1992 by then-National Conference of Catholic Bishops president, Archbishop Daniel E. Pilarczyk, at Notre Dame was the following: "Within the confines of respect for the privacy of the individuals involved, deal as openly as possible with members of the community."

That statement supports what may be called a tempered openness to the media in dealing with cases of sexual abuse by priests. Clearly such accusations are going to make local news, and the problem of clerical sexual abuse continues to be covered in the national media. Yet as such situations become more diverse and complex, applying the above principle becomes less a matter of clear and easy decisions.

Since a brief article cannot cover all contingencies, the best thing to do is to suggest the elements of a media plan which should be part of any policy on pedophilia.

The principal diocesan personnel delegated to deal with the issue of sexual abuse by clergy should form a working group for response to the media. This group should develop a written plan. If the diocese has already developed an overall crisis management plan, its media component might be relevant to developing this plan.

A SINGLE SPOKESPERSON

Perhaps the single most important element in the media plan is designating a single spokesperson on the issue; and the single most important qualification for the spokesperson is that he or she be experienced in speaking credibly to the press.

Why a single spokesperson? It is good policy to have someone formally speaking for the diocese to whom the media can be referred and whom they can quote. If several diocesan officials talk to the media, that can be confusing in both content and expression. All key diocesan and parish staff should be informed who the spokesperson is and refer comments to that person. Having a single spokesperson won't stop the media from getting quotes from whomever they can; but there will not be confusion about what the diocese has said officially.

As to the need to have a person experienced in speaking in a credible way to the media, this is an important skill which not everyone has developed. Lawyers or doctors who communicate effectively with their peers have been known to be less effective with other audiences, even with their clients and patients. The same can happen in the media context. Someone quite skilled in the issues can fail to communicate them effectively to the media.

In a matter as serious and as sensitive as sexual abuse, it is essential that the spokesperson be a credible figure who knows how to put the matter in media terms. Where there is a diocesan communications officer, that person would be an obvious choice for spokesperson.

The spokesperson has to be fully informed. Information should not be withheld from the spokesperson; and there need to be clear and concise decisions, in turn, on what information the spokesperson is not to share with the media.

Being fully informed includes a knowledge of the overall diocesan response to the problem in the recent past as well as to specific cases. The spokesperson should also know the statements of the Bishops' Conference on the problem and have some acquaintance with the problem of child abuse in general. If the spokesperson appears to be insufficiently informed, there will be no credibility, and the media will definitely look elsewhere.

If, on the other hand, the spokesperson is manifestly well informed, is clearly "in the loop," so to speak, that is a giant step toward being a credible figure. Another factor in credibility is maintaining a straightforwardness that indicates the spokesperson will communicate as much information as possible and not unnecessarily withhold information. Such a person can say the equivalent of "no comment" without sounding like a door slamming shut.

One of the most important aspects of dealing with the media is handling the follow-up calls after a story has broken. By now the reporters have probably heard from several sources and are starting to sort out the elements to go into their reports. The final product may depend on whether, during these follow-ups, the reporter considers the word of the spokesperson to be trustworthy.

The more information the media have from sources like the one described here, the less likely they are to go with rumor, innuendo or one-sided accounts. Alternatively, if those types of stories appear, the presence of an effective spokesperson will strengthen any complaints against them, since the diocese can demonstrate it made every effort to cooperate with the media.

A much more controversial suggestion is that, where possible, a priest be the spokesman on sexual abuse by clergy. The case against doing this is that the issue

of special pleading by the spokesman will surely arise. On this basis, sometimes spokespeople are chosen seemingly as a contrast to the organization represented. However if this is perceived as a ploy, it usually backfires.

The case for choosing a priest is that such a choice may indicate a lack of defensiveness and be seen as offering as the diocese's representative someone who, on account of the state of life, may very well be the most knowledgeable and experienced spokesmen for a matter that so directly affects the priesthood and pastoral ministry to the people.

In the end, though, more important than state of life is competence in dealing with the media.

If not already media trained (e.g. on-camera skills), the spokesperson needs to build on natural talent with media training so that the diocese has the best possible representation. It is also wise to conduct media training for any diocesan representative who may be approached on the issue of sexual abuse. There may be occasions when someone other than the spokesperson finds making a reply to the media inevitable. This usually happens in what is called an ambush situation which even skilled communicators find difficult. All diocesan representatives should be prepared for such incidents.

DETERMINING THE BISHOP'S MEDIA ROLE

If a priest is an appropriate spokesman, one might ask: What about the Bishop? Part of a comprehensive media plan should be to designate when it is, in fact, appropriate for the Bishop himself to meet the press.

As head of the diocese, the Bishop is the only one who can give the ultimate assurance that individual cases or the problem in general are being dealt with. Once upon a time, it was sufficient to do this in writing and to issue press releases. With a society that is becoming mostly visually oriented, it becomes increasingly important to provide a visual of the Bishop speaking to his people in this matter as well as in others.

One occasion very appropriate for the Bishop himself to appear at a news conference is to announce the diocesan pedophilia policy or major revisions of it. On such an occasion the Bishop has the opportunity to reassure his people directly that there will be no tolerance of sexual abuse and that, if it has occurred, pastoral care will be offered to those injured by it.

The Bishop's presence on other occasions should not be ruled out beforehand. An incidence of sexual abuse with particularly compelling elements or one that has attracted national attention may justify the Bishop himself being the spokesman. However, as in other matters, his importance should not be diminished by bringing him forward too often, when other spokespeople would do as well.

Whenever the Bishop himself speaks, there needs to be a thorough briefing because, in his case, some media are likely to emphasize an inadvertent error of fact or infelicitous expression.

SORTING OUT THE ISSUES

Development of a media plan also implies sorting out the issues involved, in particular, the legal and pastoral ones, which can be at odds.

Behind most media inquiries is the simple question: "Is the Church doing its job in dealing with a particular case or the problem of pedophilia in general?" This question may also be of interest of the general public. A Bishop obviously wants to offer reassurances that the matter has been dealt with. However, because of the liability issues, he may receive advice to say nothing at all or to issue a statement so harmless that it is literally next to nothing. Others are likely to emphasize as much openness with the media as possible to get the diocese's message across to the general public.

Both points of view have their legitimacy; and both have to be satisfied at least partially. Advice so risk-adverse that the Bishop cannot even express in general his condemnation of sexual abuse and his concern for the victims of it deprives him of the opportunity to reassure the people of his diocese. On the other hand, public statements that characterize the diocese's belief or lack of belief in charges yet to be proven is unfair as well as unhelpful.

The working group designing the media plan must sort out these issues. One point of view on them, agreeable to all, should be defined with regard to the issues, on the basis of which a clear and consistent message to be conveyed in the media can be developed, even if the result is saying in public not as much or not as little as some would prefer.

PLAN NEEDS TO BE LONG-TERM AND COMPREHENSIVE

The media plan cannot a short-term one, i.e. a plan to deal with a breaking story. It needs to be long-term and comprehensive. Where a criminal trial or civil suit is involved the story will surely reappear at various stages in the progress of the case. Planning needs to include what contacts will or will not be made with the media at these stages.

In civil suits the media have shown a good deal of interest in how a diocese defends itself. While the defense has to be conducted according to the best legal advice available, how that defense is presented to the media can have important repercussions for the diocese. Such considerations should be part of determining what, in fact, is the

best defense, given all the values involved. The willingness of some plaintiffs' lawyers to be available to the media or make their clients available evidences that even when a matter is to be resolved before a judge and jury, public opinion is considered entirely relevant.

Even such traditional legal defenses as invoking the statute of limitations may be attacked as the Church's attempt to evade responsibility by using "technicalities." Perhaps the best response to this accusation is for Church to demonstrate its willingness to assume its moral responsibility even where, by normal standards, it bears no legal responsibility.

One example of an unfortunate public perception is that of the Church as another "deep pockets" organization. It is not irrelevant to combat that with information that demonstrates either that a diocese may not be as affluent as often supposed or that its money is not for personal profit but for the spiritual, educational and charitable works of the Church.

A media plan needs to take into consideration the aftermath of a suit or a trial. When a suit is settled out of court and the settlement is sealed, this is sometimes portrayed as a "cover-up." Given the media's omnivorous appetite for information, it's difficult to persuade them that this is not the case. However, it may be worthwhile reminding them that in our litigious society, in which fighting a lawsuit can be far more costly than settling, settlements are becoming less and less indicative of the merits of a case.

In a criminal case, whether the priest is found guilty or not guilty, there needs to be a prepared response about the priest's continued affiliation with the diocese. This includes cases in which a prison sentence has been imposed. A diocese should also be prepared for questions about the sentence and be alert to how the sentence of a priest appears in relation to the sentences of others convicted on similar charges.

Where it is known that priests have been sent away for treatment, the media may want to know where and what kind of treatment. The former may be legitimately off limits. The diocese may, however, want to indicate, in general and non-technically, what "treatment" consists of.

Another concern is the possible re-emergence of a case. In the recent past, for example, victims have renounced settlements made several months or years before and demanded further action on the part of the diocese. If this becomes a public matter, responding to it requires a thorough updating in the case. It may happen that, with a case several years old, diocesan officials may decide that they would indeed handle it differently if the case were current.

It may then be necessary to indicate further steps the diocese may take, even revision of its policy. These cases often involve one of the toughest tasks of all: putting the issue into its historical context so the media are challenged to see why a once reasonable solution needs to be revisited.

CONCERN FOR VICTIMS

Church representatives have often indicated that a primary concern is the pastoral care of victims. The media plan needs to show how this concern is made concrete, although the delicacy of the issue makes doing so one of the most difficult tasks of all.

If a lawsuit is involved, the legal system invariably casts the diocese (often the bishop personally) and the victims as adversaries. The media often pick up on this and exacerbate it.

Without putting down the victims' rights to seek relief through the courts, the right of the diocese to defend itself and its need to safeguard its ability to continue to carry on its service to its people needs to be thoroughly explained.

Even when there is not a lawsuit and victims have been satisfied with the pastoral care they have received, little of this information is likely to be available to the media. Understandably some victims may hesitate to have their stories publicized.

Probably the most likely ways concern for victims can be shown is by establishing a diocesan policy, by the effective implementation of that policy when cases arise, and by an always pastoral attitude displayed towards victims when speaking with them and of them, even in the midst of legal proceedings. Also, services the diocese makes available to victims, through Catholic Charities, for example, should be acknowledged as instances of diocesan concern for victims.

DEVELOP A PRO-ACTIVE STANCE

Another element of the media plan is to develop what is often called a pro-active stance: to be ready with the story rather than to have it break elsewhere. While one may hope that a case of sexual abuse may not make news, circumstances make that less and less likely, especially in the present atmosphere. The removal of a pastor at an odd time (during Holy Week, for example) can signal a story. Leaving both media and parishioners in the dark to speculate on the reasons can worsen the situation.

It should be spelled out in advance under what circumstances the diocese itself will make the announcement of a case of abuse.

A media plan should also involve having some written documentation at hand for media inquiries. Available from the USCC Media Relations Office are the National Conference of Catholic Bishops statements and the "Brief Overview of the Conference Involvement in Assisting Dioceses with Child Molestation Cases." Prepared in the diocese ought to be the local diocesan policy on sexual abuse; perhaps a locally developed "Brief Overview" of the diocese's response; and models of statements for various situations.

Since many media inquiries are likely to be of the nature, "What is the Church doing about sexual abuse," it is certainly handy to have available a brief statement describing diocesan efforts. This will aid both the efficiency and consistency of response. Where possible the development of audio-visual material would make this kind of information more available to the electronic media.

IMPORTANCE OF THE OVERALL MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

Effective overall relations with the media are an essential part of any media plan. If there have been good relations between the media and the diocese in the past, this is likely to have some impact on the handling of this specific matter. Obviously the reverse can be true. Also good media relations is not a matter only of dealing with the reporters. They are not the last word in the development of stories. They have editors above them who probably have or soon will have a viewpoint on the diocese. Besides news stories, there are also editorial comment and independent commentators. Much of the latter is more common in the press than in electronic journalism, but they can be factors even there.

It is relevant to the diocese's overall relationship with the media to develop contact with the editors, editorial boards and executives of media organizations. Especially with regard to a story that has become one involving charges of Bishops' "covering up" the problem of pedophilia, the availability of Bishops to talk to these other actors in the media and demonstrate their grasp of the problem and their commitment to resolving it is an effective response to the charge.

Nor should the media go unchallenged. If they are not living up to their own standards of professional conduct at any level, this should be pointed out, with the supporting evidence. Personal meetings are best for this, but letters to the editor either for or not for publication can be used. The opportunity to respond through op-ed pieces or listener and viewer replies to broadcast editorial comment should also be taken advantage of.

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A judgement also needs to be made about cooperation with media outlets which have shown themselves sensationalistic or biased. While keeping them informed along with the rest of the media, you may decide not to provide them with additional interviews and media contacts.

ROLE OF DIOCESAN MEDIA AND CONTACTS WITH OTHER DIOCESES

A media plan also needs to consider how to involve the diocesan media. Such involvement can be a sensitive issue. However, to exclude the diocesan media may be to miss what may be the only opportunity in the local media for a full and accurate presentation of the matter. Also to be considered is the effect of excluding Catholic media from a story of obvious importance to the Catholic community. Diocesan media people may argue that their exclusion from such stories affects their overall credibility, which is clearly a real possibility.

The newspaper also provides an opportunity for the Bishop to share his thoughts directly with his people on this matter.

When diocesan media personnel, such as the newspaper editor, are part of the working group, the potential for conflict between being a news gatherer and the confidentiality of the working group needs to be assessed.

The need for interaction among the spokespeople from different dioceses should be considered. The media is alert to the various ways dioceses respond to cases, especially those geographically close to one another. It is helpful to know how and why cases are handled the way they are in the surrounding dioceses and to be ready with an explanation of the differences.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

A few additional observations can be made.

On the whole, Church spokespeople have been relatively absent from reports on this issue, while individual victims, victims groups, and their lawyers have been in the media. Some media bias can be perceived in this situation, but it also has to be acknowledged that for quite a while the matter was handled by the Church privately. That needs to change. Spokespeople for the Church need to be available to assure the public of what the Church is doing.

Also, it was noted above that growing complexity makes media decisions more difficult. Previously most cases involved charges of relatively recent behavior which were verified or rebutted fairly quickly. Now the charges often go back many years, are not as

easily verifiable, and may or may not indicate a continuing sexual disorder which disqualifies a priest from further ministry. Another problem connected with allegations from long past is the phenomenon of the recovery of repressed memories. These memories apparently have been proven accurate in some cases but spectacularly inaccurate in others.

Neither the Church nor the media is on entirely sure ground in dealing with ambiguous cases. That itself makes for a tense relationship since the media will often choose to publicize these cases while the Church -- or any other organization or accused person -- will counter that an allegation is not proof and that there may be a need for further corroboration before going public. This is a discrepancy of approach not easy to reconcile.

In addition, this increasing complexity makes a media plan more necessary than ever. The media are contributory to making pedophilia a national issue for which many Catholics are demanding some kind of national response. One does not have to live in the South to have heard of the Gauthier case nor in New England to know about James Porter. Reports of financial troubles in one diocese over pedophilia cases raise questions about all dioceses. With such national attention, it is at least as likely that the Bishops' overall response will be judged by the worst handled cases in the media as by the best.

With due respect to the right of each diocese to conduct its own affairs, analysis of media coverage offers ample reason for regional and national coordination on a response to the pedophilia problem.

Finally, it is worth pointing out that we live in a nation in which the media and the populace are suspicious of large organizations and their leadership. While it is to be hoped that this would not be true of Catholics and the Church, in a matter involving the safety of children, many may decide to err on the side of skepticism.

The effort to convince the media that the Church is working hard to eliminate the problem of clerical sexual abuse is not for the media's sake, but for the sake of the millions of Catholics who will be influenced by the messages that come from the media and for the sake of their confidence in the Church and the priesthood.

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SUMMARY

To sum up, as part of its pedophilia policy, a diocese should set up a group, made up of the principal diocesan personnel involved in dealing with the issue of clerical sexual abuse, to coordinate a media response. They should draw up a long-term media plan that involves:

- 1) designating a single spokesperson;
- 2) determining when to involve the Bishop with the media;
- 3) defining a point of view with regard to the issues involved from which is developed a clear and consistent message to be conveyed in the media;
- 4) making concrete the diocese's pastoral concern for victims;
- 5) developing written and/or audio-visual materials about the diocesan response for use by the media;
- 6) providing for media training for the principals involved;
- 7) considering the inclusion of the diocesan media;
- 8) contacting other dioceses to find out about how they respond.

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