



## THE CHURCH-MEDIA RELATIONSHIP: HOW DOES THE PROFANE MEDIA TREAT THE SACRED MESSAGE?

### A RELAÇÃO IGREJA-MEDIA: COMO OS MEIOS DE COMUNICAÇÃO PROFANOS TRATAM A MENSAGEM SAGRADA?

■ TERÉZIA RONČÁKOVÁ<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Ph.D. Ružomberok Catholic University (2006). Assistant professor (Docent), Faculty of Philosophy, Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia. Ph.D. Universidade Católica de Ružomberok (2006). Professor Assistente (Docente), Faculdade de Filosofia, Universidade Católica de Ružomberok, Eslováquia. E-mail: terezia.roncakova@ku.sk; troncakova@gmail.com.

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**Abstract:** The coexistence of mass media and the Church draws the attention of scholars due to the existence of a sort of 'subliminal' conflict. This conflict has been widely examined and has led to many interesting and inspiring results. This paper attempts to address the causes of the current state drawing on the generally known facts and extensive experience of a common media consumer, and provides several valuable insights based on author's previous research. Before exploring the actual causes, the author clarifies the following two starting points of her examination: the position of journalists (what annoys them about the Church and, conversely, what they welcome in her approach) and the position of the Church (what annoys her about journalists and conversely, what she welcomes in their approach). After clarifying some causes, she turns her attention to the consequences; adding, finally, a short provocative reflection.

**Keywords:** *Sacrum*; *Profanum*; religion; media.

## A RELAÇÃO IGREJA-MEDIA: COMO OS MEIOS DE COMUNICAÇÃO PROFANOS TRATAM A MENSAGEM SAGRADA?

**Resumo:** A coexistência dos meios de comunicação de massa e a Igreja chama a atenção dos estudiosos devido à existência de uma espécie de conflito "subliminar". Este conflito foi amplamente examinado e levou a muitos resultados interessantes e inspiradores. Este artigo tenta abordar as causas do estado atual com base nos fatos geralmente conhecidos e na vasta experiência de um consumidor comum de mídia, além de fornecer várias informações valiosas com base nas pesquisas anteriores do autor. Antes de explorar as causas reais, a autora esclarece os seguintes dois pontos de partida de seu exame: a posição dos jornalistas (o que os incomoda na Igreja e, inversamente, o que eles acolhem em sua abordagem) e a posição da Igreja (o que a incomoda sobre jornalistas e, inversamente, o que ela recebe em sua abordagem). Depois de esclarecer algumas causas, ela volta sua atenção para as consequências; adicionando, finalmente, uma breve reflexão provocativa.

**Palavras-chave:** *Sacrum; Profanum*; religião; meios de comunicação.

## LA RELACIÓN IGLESIA-MEDIOS DE COMUNICACIÓN: ¿CÓMO TRATAN LOS MEDIOS PROFANOS EL MENSAJE SAGRADO?

**Resumen:** La coexistencia de los medios de comunicación y la Iglesia llama la atención de los académicos debido a la existencia de una especie de conflicto "subliminal". Este conflicto ha sido ampliamente examinado y ha llevado a muchos resultados interesantes e inspiradores. Este artículo intenta abordar las causas del estado actual con base en hechos comúnmente conocidos y la vasta experiencia de un consumidor promedio de medios, y proporciona una gran cantidad de información valiosa basada en la investigación previa del autor. Antes de explorar las causas reales, la autora aclara los siguientes dos puntos de partida de su examen: la posición de los periodistas (lo que les molesta en la Iglesia y, por el contrario, lo que acogen en su enfoque) y la posición de la Iglesia (el eso le molesta sobre los periodistas y, por el contrario, lo que obtiene en su enfoque). Después de aclarar algunas causas, dirige su atención a las consecuencias; agregando, finalmente, una breve reflexión provocativa.

**Palabras clave:** *Sacrum; Profanum*; religión; medios de comunicación.

### Introduction

The question of the Church – media relationship has been one of the widely discussed topics by both the general public and scholars since the emergence of the first printed periodicals. With the rise of electronic media (radio, television) the interest in this topic and the intensity of the debate has increased significantly. Another impetus was the growth of media research activity in mid-20th century related to growing concerns about the use of propaganda and manipulation. A more specifically targeted research activity with respect to the relationship of media and religion was seen in the 1980s. The coexistence of mass media and the Church draws the attention of scholars due to the existence of a sort of 'subliminal' conflict. This conflict has been widely

examined and has led to many interesting and inspiring results<sup>2</sup>. Thus, today's attempts to describe this co-existence -- which is by no means trouble-free -- or explore which side is negatively impacted by this conflict would be neither sufficient nor useful. Therefore, this paper attempts to address the causes of the current state drawing on the generally known facts and extensive experience of a common media consumer, and provide several valuable insights based on my previous research (2009, 2010, 2012, 2013).

Before exploring the actual causes, I will clarify the following two starting points of my examination: the position of journalists (what annoys them about the Church and, conversely, what they welcome in her approach) and the position of the Church (what annoys her about journalists and conversely, what she welcomes in their approach). After clarifying some causes, I will turn my attention to the consequences. Finally, I will add a short provocative reflection.

### **What annoys journalists?**

Based on inter alia current church and social developments in Slovakia and the associated public discussion I would like to point out three patterns of behaviour of the Church, which journalists find irritating:

- withdrawnness, silence;
- arrogance; and
- hypocrisy.

Nothing irritates journalists more than the reluctance of Church officials to provide information and give opinions on important issues. It is the journalists' bread and butter to cover these issues but without cooperation with the officials they simply cannot do their work. It is exactly at bishops' conferences or at bishops' offices where journalists are often faced with a 'not-your-business' approach on the part of the officials. They are faced with a kind of secretum as if everything was explicitly an internal affair of the Church. Therefore, journalists often acquire and

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<sup>2</sup> Researchers have focused e.g. on the relation of what is sacred and what is media-related (SILK 1995, HOOVER, VENTURELLI 1996, ROTHENBUHLER, COMAN 2005, GONZÁLEZ GAITANO 2009, OLEKŠÁK 2011, RONČÁKOVÁ 2012, 2013b); anti-religious bias in media (DART, ALLEN 1993, CONTRERAS 2007, GAZDA 2009); media approach to new religious movements (WRIGHT 1997, RICHARDSON, DRIEL 1997, SILK 1997, DART 1997, HOOVER, CLARK 1997, HILL, HICKMAN, MCLENDON 2001); differences of religious and media language and style (MISTRÍK 1991, WOJTAK 1992, MAKUCHOWSKA 1995, KOLKOVÁ 2002, MLACEK 2012); religious media audience (STOUT, BUDDENBAUM 1996, YEGANEH 2008, KHOJASTE, KALANTARI 2009). Significant attention was focused on mediated religion, i.e. religious impact of media (MEYER, MOORS 2006, THOMAS 2008, BAHONAR 2009) and media as religion (ROTHENBUHLER 1998, STOLOW 2005, MEYER 2008, CRUZ 2009, SUMIALA 2012). One of the research offshoots is the examination of argumentation bases used by religious and media communicators as starting points of their messages (SILK 1995, GONZÁLEZ GAITANO 2010, CONTRERAS 2007, GAZDA 2009, 2011, RONČÁKOVÁ 2012).

spread a feeling that the Church is a ghetto, a separate world living its own life. Outside the walls of the ghetto – to develop the metaphor further – they often nourish various myths or even prejudices. Journalists think that life inside the ghetto must be really hard. In April 2014, when the media story about the corruption at the Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia, reached its climax as the rector of this institution uncovered serious financial irregularities, the questionable granting of academic titles, and so forth, and when the names of several bishops were frequently mentioned in the media in connection with the case, one radio editor was unable to get the officials to the table for a broadcast discussion. They were full of anger, disgust, mutual resentment, and absolutely did not feel like quarrelling in front of a microphone. Others did not feel sufficiently familiarized with all the facts, considering the complicated web of audits and court proceedings. But the editor was quick to determine the diagnosis: fear. In an unapproachable institution like that, they must all be shivering with fear...

Negative emotions about being rejected are often enhanced when the communicator from time to time fails to keep his or her emotions under control, breaks the boundaries of common decency and spits out something arrogant right into the opponent's face. Thus, the bridges are burnt, and doors closed for a prolonged period of time. One of the unfortunate bearers of such a label of being an arrogant person in Slovakia is the spokesperson of the Slovak Bishops' Conference, Jozef Kováčik. His statement about the former anti-communist dissident and long-time Christian Democrat, František Mikloško, has reached a wide audience. Mikloško was the first person to inform about the planned removal of the Trnava Archbishop Róbert Bezák<sup>3</sup> and in response to this news, the spokesperson of the bishops' conference laconically stated that it was nonsense and that Mikloško "offers plots similar to those of Dan Brown". Several hours later, the removal became reality and J. Kováčik wears his Dan Brown label still today.

Hypocrisy, with respect to the church officials, is viewed by media as the most crucial category. This category is the unifying leitmotiv of the previous primary researches into the argumentation schemes in the Church – media relationship – primarily within the framework of the pioneering research of the ancient Greek rhetorical topoi in media discourse by the American scholar M. Silk<sup>4</sup>. When the media hunt for sensational stories and misdemeanors of the church

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<sup>3</sup> Born in 1960, Róbert Bezák is a priest of the order of Redemptorists. For 12 years he served as Provincial Superior of this religious order. He was regarded a charismatic and popular missionary. In 2009, he became the Archbishop of the Archdiocese of Trnava, where he was perceived by many as a reformer. In July 2013, Archbishop Bezák was removed from office by Benedict XVI. The church refused to disclose the reasons for removal, but media were gradually supplied with internal church documents, the Archbishop provided several interviews and he was later explicitly banned by the Vatican to make any statements to media.

<sup>4</sup> The examination of the argumentation bases of the messages of religious and media communicators represents an important and a lively branch of media – church relationship research. Authors base their researches on the classical

hierarchy, spiritual or lay believers, the key phenomenon at work here is the disappointment of hypocrisy. The key driver here is not prejudice or hatred of the Church, but rather a reproach for preaching water and drinking wine. A desire to change things can also be identified, so that the Church remains faithful to its teaching, so it becomes a beacon – though often bypassed but still shining. As the aforementioned story of corruption at the Slovak Catholic University began to unfold, voices of experienced ‘experts’ could be heard: “See? We told you it was not a good idea to put ‘Catholic’ in the title of the university because it would always be put under scrutiny.” But the stakeholders are well aware of this heightened attention. Whether it is better to avoid it or face it – that’s a different question.

### What is welcomed by journalists?

Two patterns were identified as valued by journalists about the Church (with respect to media):

- openness, ‘normalcy’; and
- provocative character.

Based on my extensive research of the media coverage of historically, one of the most unprecedented (and still pending) church cases in Slovakia – the case of the removal of Archbishop R. Bezák (2013a, 2013c) from the office – I arrived at a conclusion that the second most powerful underlying argumentation scheme for secular media covering this story was openness (the most powerful was justice because the removal from office was generally viewed as unjust; the difference between the aforementioned two *topoi* was just one percent<sup>5</sup>). Two mutually contradictory vectors ensued from this argumentation bases: “a belief that it is good to be accessible, understandable, kind, internally truthful, human and ‘normal’ – and a belief that it is bad to be closed, isolated, authoritarian, elitist, false and cold” (2013c, p. 30). The approach of the Slovak mainstream tabloid daily *Nový Čas*, specifically the editor Zuzana Šišovská, is quite symptomatic. In a documentary aired by the Czech Television about R. Bezák<sup>6</sup> she could be seen in a friendly and light-heartedly

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rhetorical category of *topoi*, or *loci comuni* (ARISTOTLE 1994, CICERO 1998). The concept was introduced into modern media research by M. Silk (1995) and developed among others by N. González Gaitano (2010). The discourse tracking method combined with *topoi* is currently employed by scholars such as D. Contreras (2007) or I. Gazda (2009, 2011).

<sup>5</sup> The *topos* of justice appeared in 35% of examined material, the *topos* of openness in 34%. Overall, the sample subject to examination included 976 journalistic material collected within the period of one year from the outbreak of the case in June 2012 until the first anniversary of the removal of the Archbishop on 2 July 2013 in all Slovak social affairs printed periodicals, broadcasting, television and e-zines.

<sup>6</sup> A film directed by Peter Minařík *Arcibiskup s lidskou tváří* (Archbishop with A Human Face), shot in 2012.

confrontational discussion with the Archbishop prompting him (unsuccessfully) to let himself be photographed in a fitness centre. It is clear that despite the Archbishop's refusal to provide her with such tabloid material, his behavior toward her was humane and she showed respect for him. Her second attempt was more of a friendly teasing than a serious request. Later, when the Archbishop was removed by the Pope it was Z. Šišovská and *Nový Čas* which became one of his loudest and persistent supporters. Bezák's humane approach at the reception he organised on the occasion of the blessing of regional wines – and presumably also at various other occasions – opened doors for him even to the tabloid press.

A provocative character is perfectly compatible with the classical journalistic rule: "It's doesn't make news when a dog bites a man, but when a man bites the dog". It's not that provocative communicators are perverted; they simply wish to satisfy the media requirement to provide the audience with something unusual, unexpected – hence interesting. Provocative communicators could be thought of as free minds that have the necessary courage to articulate and spread an untraditional, courageous, and at the same time simple, understandable ideas, quite often using figurative language. The role of such 'provocateurs' is often taken up by priests who, quite interestingly, somehow manage to attract quite a lot of people to think about God and religion in general. When I explored this remarkable phenomenon in more detail (2013e) I concluded *inter alia* that what these evangelists have in common was love of unbelievers or the non-practicing Christians and a kind of charisma to approach them in the right way. At the same time, they can be, in a sense, regarded as prophets who manifest the ancient truth that to make prophesies means to provoke. A typical example of a priest – provocateur in the Czech and Slovak setting is a young Premonstratensian, Karol Lovaš<sup>7</sup>. Today, the former journalist, who has gone through a radical conversion and decided to devote his life to God, publishes books of poems and short reflections. He also blogs extensively and acts as an exclusive commentator of a widely read secular news website. He has developed his own specific style full of catchy sentences such as "At least two are necessary for love. As to sin, one will do." No need to mention that within the church circles he is regarded as *persona non grata*. The fact he is 'media-friendly' is the cause and at the same time a consequence of this conflict.

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<sup>7</sup> Karol Lovaš publishes his Sunday reflections, poems, interviews and photographs at <http://www.bratsavol.sk>.

## What annoys the Church?

Based on my own experience, contact with critics and based on reading between the lines in the published journalistic material in Slovakia, one can also infer what the Church dislikes about the journalists. In Slovakia, quite a telling example is, for instance, the column in the *Katolícke noviny* (Catholic newspaper) weekly, in which authors like to respond to the way other media cover certain topics. The points of conflict perceived by the respective church officials with respect to media was aptly formulated as early as 20 years ago by a Jesuit and a professor of theology at Fordham University in Bronx, New York. Avery Dulles (1994) defined seven points of contrast which he found to a great extent natural and necessary:

- mystery of faith and reverence vs. investigative nature, exposing, irony;
- eternal continuity vs. innovation;
- unity, reconciliation vs. conflict;
- abstract spirituality vs. tangible and concrete message;
- hierarchy, authoritativeness vs. democracy, dissent;
- complexity, technical language vs. superficial coverage;
- evangelisation, faith vs. generally understandable content.

Many of the Dulles's categories are closely related to the ones mentioned herein. In the next passage I would like to focus on the following three negatives, which the Church perceives to be present in the approach of media to its activities:

- disinterest;
- ignorance; and
- tabloid nature.

Obviously, disinterest does annoy any institution that would like to draw attention of general public to its activities. Disinterest is often seen by church officials as deliberate or based on prejudice. However, it is questionable whether these phenomena are indeed at work. It might well be that the reasons behind them are much simpler. Journalists often object to accusations of holding prejudices against the Church and point to the key rules of their journalistic craft: if you're interesting, you'll get through our filter; if you're not, you won't. The filter here is the so-called *news values*, i.e. values the presence of which is inevitable for any information to become worthy of journalistic coverage and pass through to the audience. These values include primarily conflict, money, eroticism, violence and many others, called differently by different scholars, including

elitism, oddity, unexpectedness, spatial proximity, storyline, etc. Along with Diego Contreras<sup>8</sup>, a media expert of the Papal University Santa Croce in Rome one can conclude that these are superficial values which do not require much effort from the journalist to identify and cover. Of course, there are other values which need to be sought deeper, but these require more effort to be presented in an interesting and understandable manner. In one of my previous works (2010, p. 49) I called these '*gospel values*' and identified them with virtues. Righteousness, fidelity, generosity, self-sacrifice, kindness, patience or humility can also arouse interest in today's audience; however, more effort needs to be spared to cover them attractively. A great carrier of such a message – one which also corresponds to the requirements of media language – is the story. Other starting points were sought and examined in detail in my other works (2009a, 2009b, 2010). Here, it should be noted that the method of overcoming the disinterest of media is twofold. One is to engage in professional journalistic coverage to convey events based on *gospel values* and at the same time, overcome fears of the classical news values, for instance, the notoriously criticised conflict, which the Church itself knows too well from the very time when Jesus said: "I have come to cast fire upon the earth; and how I wish it were already kindled! Do you suppose that I came to grant peace on earth? I tell you, no, but rather division" (LUKE 12:49-51).

Another problem ensues with respect to the church and media outputs. It is when the aforementioned silence is broken in an inappropriate fashion. One of the things that strikes the eye most and often becomes subject to criticism is terminological errors of journalists who are not familiar with the church language and environment. Church officials often complain about the unprofessional approach of journalists and call for professionally competent, well-trained editors who would not use phrases such as 'Mr. Pope', 'consecrate a new saint' or 'attend a baptism', etc. However, one should understand that such a lack of professionalism on the part of the editors is an unfortunate consequence of a broader trend in media sector – an effort to employ smaller, younger and cheaper staff, something which negatively impacts not only the coverage of church matters but also other more sophisticated topics. This, however, is a much broader issue beyond the scope of this paper and is addressed by sociological works focused on the journalistic profession and its future developments<sup>9</sup>.

Another striking and notoriously recurrent mistake of the media outputs covering church-related topics is the loss of message. This phenomenon has been referred to in a number of researches<sup>10</sup>. Researches show that at mass-scale national pilgrimage events, papal visits abroad

<sup>8</sup> Personal research interview with D. Contreras in November 2008.

<sup>9</sup> See also Brečková, Šrámek 1991, Jiráček 2007, Brečka 2010, 2011, Brečka, Ondrášik, Keklak 2010.

<sup>10</sup> For the most recent research see also Coman 2014, Kolková 2008.



or similar events the media effectively filter out the spiritual message or any deeper thoughts brought through such events. On the other hand, what does catch media attention is, for instance, the prices of souvenirs, number of injured, environmentalists' protests, lunch menus of the clergy, etc. The church officials have just this in mind when they use the derogative term 'tabloid'. Under the term tabloid they understand partial vision (ability to see only a portion of the whole, often unrepresentative), misinterpretation (emphasis on aspects far beyond the essence), sensationalism, etc. Concerns over this approach then determine the attitude of the Church to media, but the reluctance of the clergy to expose to this danger is definitely by far not new. The First Vatican Council (1869 – 1870), for instance, imposed an informational embargo on media releases during the council in an effort to avoid inaccuracies and distortions. This has led to even more distorted newscasts based on information from third parties, rumours and conjectures. In an effort to overcome this problem the Second Vatican Council created a Council press office and set clear rules, however the organisers of press conferences and discussions had to regularly overcome fears of the prelates to become an easy prey for simplifying and sketchy-thinking journalists<sup>11</sup>.

### **What is welcomed by the Church?**

The answer to the question what the Church welcomes in the approach of journalists is quite simple: sufficient media space and a positive media image. The approach of the Church is similar to any other institution which tries to maintain a positive public image. But to make this laconic answer a bit more complicated, another question is whether the Church (should) be trying to build its own image in media or the image of God, or, whether it should try to mediate the contact with God through media. This question, however, should be set within the framework of reflections about the evangelization potential of media – which is beyond the scope of this paper. The answer was sought in a number of previous researches (ROSENTHAL 2007, LAPKO 2008, CELLI 2009, DULLES 2009, DLUHÝ 2013, RONČÁKOVÁ 2013d) and the findings more or less converged to an assertion that media was not a suitable and usable instrument for direct conversion. They may help to keep the faith alive however this is a domain of a specific religious journalistic style. It seems that common secular media and the expression thereof are limited to creating a positive image of

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<sup>11</sup> For a comprehensive and compelling depiction of experience of operating a press centre at the Second Vatican Council see the book entitled *The Rhine flows into the Tiber. A History of Vatican II* (1967) by Ralph M. Wiltgen S.W.D., a historian and Verbite, who led the Verbite press service Council News Service during the Second Vatican Council.

the Church. These findings have gradually eroded the Church's initial ambitions and hopes of seeking new evangelization strategies through media.

## Causes

Following these initial remarks, we may now turn to the question of the causes behind the current state of affairs. From a broad palette of possible diagnoses here I would like to point to four:

- monopoly on interpretation;
- the concept of 'home kitchen';
- black-and-white vision; and
- perceived feeling of a binding nature of statements.

The Church's approach to any disclosure of information and subsequent attempt of engaged citizens – including journalists to offer their interpretations and possible explanations – often boils down to the question as to who will have the last word in the discussion. Church officials eagerly defend their imaginary 'monopoly' on the interpretation of events and treat any external attempts to understand the internal problems with distrust or disrespect. When the chief editor of a well-known Slovak conservative website Postoy.sk wrote an analysis of the aforementioned case on the Catholic University in Ružomberok he received an email from a prominent church official the point of which can be summarized as follows: "With all respect, sir, you have no idea." The situation occurs regularly even in relation to more significant topics related mainly to internal conflicts within the Church. The story of the removed Archbishop Bezák in this context does not even need to be mentioned. It is an exemplary case demonstrating the rejection of any published explanation by using the argument that the public does not have any chance to get a reasonable insight or obtain an understanding of any problem within the Church. A telling phrase "you have no clue" is used as if it was to reinforce the authority of the one who *knows* but does not say. According to M. Coman (2014), a Romanian sociologist and journalism theorist who studies media rituals and how media take on certain roles traditionally borne by religion, the essence of religious communication is revelation. He who reveals *knows*. But media are also in the position of *those who know* – and this might be one source of conflict between media and the Church.

The concept of 'home kitchen' or a 'laundry room' points to popular comparisons of the Church to a family. A family holds together, family members mutually support themselves, family speaks one voice, a family sorts out all troubles at home and does not bring things out – and, most importantly, a family does not resolve e.g. father's alcoholism or his wife's infidelity through tabloid

press. The unity (at least an external) is at work in the Church's approach to difficulties. It almost works as a magic formula. Efforts to preserve it at any price sometimes remind us of the words of Caiaphas: "[...] it is expedient for you that one man die for the people" (JOHN 11:50). The argument of unity was one of the most significant also in the discourse related to the removal of R. Bezák. Within the analyzed texts on this topic published by the Slovak weekly *Katolícke noviny*<sup>12</sup> the *topos* of unity achieved a 20% share on the examined texts. The argumentation scheme of unity emphasizes the value of peace, cohesion, brotherly love and reconciliation. The division of the Church was presented as bad and the union with the Church as key – with its value exceeding any personal interest or injustice (RONČÁKOVÁ, 2013c, p. 31). In the eyes of the proponents of such an approach, actions of the current Pope Francis erode this principle, for example, by his excessive criticism of priests and consecrated persons in front of the public. A young Slovak priest studying in Rome, Peter Fogaš, made a bold statement against this practice in his commentary on the Postoy.sk website: "Surely, calls for caution and encouragement are necessary and true, but still, one thing does not fit into the whole picture. The head of the Church speaks to a crowd of 50 thousand pilgrims, thereof perhaps 1 % priests and 0.2 % bishops (a very rough and rather optimistic estimate), and he goes on catechising all of them by criticising and disciplining these small groups. Consider an analogical situation in an elementary school. Imagine a director at the opening of a new school year having 500 students and 50 teachers in front of him, talking about deficiencies of the teaching staff. He would then go on and emphasise where they should improve in an effort to make the learning process more efficient and improve the results. How should the teacher then stand up in front of his class and retain his authority?" (FOGAŠ, 2014). It seems that the need to preserve the authority with respect to the laity is the underlying motive of such an approach. One or two paragraphs below, P. Fogaš concludes: "Shouldn't it be the other way around? Shouldn't the boss encourage the employees at a meeting to respect the authorities – and shouldn't he enumerate their deficiencies, discipline them and criticise, speak with them behind the closed door (Pope with bishops and priests, bishops with priests, directors with teachers, owner with trainers)?" The commentator then openly speaks about a kind of nostalgia of the clergy for Benedict XVI. and the related 'home laundering'. The approach 'cook at home first and let the public taste later' permeates many more areas and topics. In Slovakia, it is also present in the debate about the separation of the Church from the state. The spokesperson of the Slovak Bishops' Conference, J. Kováčik, informed the public on numerous occasions that this agenda is "currently

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<sup>12</sup> An official church weekly with a nation-wide coverage founded in 1849. With the current circulation of 80,000, it is the sixth bestselling weekly in Slovakia.

being prepared within the competent committees”. Here, a potential public discussion is regarded as an undesired interference of the negotiations. The idea is as follows: a discussion in the media is completely unacceptable because media would attempt to take the reins and influence the processes.

When examining the black-and-white vision strongly present in the attitudes of the representatives of the Church but also among common lay believers, a reference to the period of Communism is often articulated (i.e. a period ending 25 years ago), which taught people to discern between friends and enemies, the good and the bad guys. There was nothing in between. Now those on the other side of the barricade are already thrown into a ‘box’. Breaking this rigid way of thinking does not pay off. Shortly before Christmas 2013, a group of devotees from various Christian churches published a book of interviews with well-known figures about their faith and relation to God entitled *Kristovci* (FOLLOWERS OF CHRIST, BECHNÝ, 2013). One of the presentations of this book was organised in cooperation with a secular foundation. The head of the foundation invited a provocative writer known for his critical views of the Church, Michal Hvorecký, to moderate the discussion. His mere acceptance of this invitation could be understood positively as a welcomed effort on his part to enter into a dialogue. However, his name on the invitation in media coverage acted more as a red rag on the audience. Organisers have been hearing time and again questions such as: “... okay, fine – but why Hvorecký...?!” It seems as if a bipolar interpretation of the reality was considered a much more ‘energy-efficient’ solution than distinguishing the shades of gray. However, it is questionable whether this pattern can be described (solely) as a Communist heritage. In the 1960s, Ladislav Hanus, a significant Slovak theologian and culture philosopher, used the phrase ‘fanaticism of truth’ in one of his works entitled *Princíp pluralizmu* (THE PRINCIPLE OF PLURALISM, 1997, p. 111). Hanus says Christians are vulnerable to such fanaticism, which, in turn leads to intolerance. Another extreme in seeking the truth, Hanus writes, is “tolerance, but as if by definition, at the cost of indifference to the truth, a resignation on the truth, throwing the truth overboard”. These extremes are at work even today: on one hand, one can hear the militant rhetoric against the “culture of death” and a “caressing dialogue” attempting to seek by all means understanding, empathy and consent for one’s opponents. For Hanus, the way out is a path between the Charybdis of fanaticism and the Scylla of indifference is a non-caressing dialogue. As concluded by philosopher and current chairman of the Ladislav Hanus Fellowship, Juraj Šúst<sup>13</sup>, prolife and pro-family protests will bear fruit if and when the community

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<sup>13</sup> Ladislav Hanus Fellowship (SLH) is a Catholic academic fellowship whose mission is to draw inspiration from the great thinkers of Western civilization, develop discussion, argumentation, leadership skills, spiritual life, relationships

pursues them with clear, but at the same time, open and inviting attitudes. This means that the key to success is in the ability to enter into a *relationship* with 'the others'. This is the answer to a seeming contradiction between mass scale protests and an eternal and toothless dialogue (ŠÚST, 2014).

Finally, in communication with the world, church officials are often bound by a strong feeling of commitment to formality and binding nature of their own statements. It is as if any word they speak out ought to have the gravity of Holy Scripture. They do this because of own experience with believers. Many believers actually do see their statements that way. Thus, priests are afraid to confuse people by making statements on topics which are incomplete, open or subject to further development, or any statements to which their own attitude is just being formed, or in situations where the opinion of the author of a statement does not represent a majority view within the community of local bishops. The rule 'do not confuse people' becomes almost something like a mantra, which precludes the church media from publishing any questionable content or providing room for different opinions, not to speak about provocative or explicitly off-the-wall statements. If, in exceptional cases, this happens, such statement is sure to be followed by a clear editorial explanatory note as to how things really are. This approach is based on an assumption that the receiver does not discern between an opinion and a news item or does not have the mental capacity to evaluate and to get orientated. In an atmosphere like this, many bishops and priests do not feel sufficiently free and therefore refuse to expose their own subjective attitudes to current affairs. There are no Slovak bloggers and bishops. This simple fact speaks for itself. In Poland and Czech Republic, the situation is different as they have managed to overcome this mental barrier and publish their own blogs or video blogs (GAZDA, 2014).

## Consequences

The key consequence of the causes described above is, quite obviously, the inability of religious (or church) news to pass through the filter of media interest. Another related consequence is the current state of the church media.

The aforementioned causes lead to (1) lack of communication, (2) communication deprived of any content or (3) strongly apologetic media outputs. All three forms directly contradict the established code of conduct in the media environment. The natural consequence is that

communication fails to pass through the eye of the media needle – which in turn leads to lack of desired content in media. It should be remembered that the established media code of conduct also includes qualities such as promptness, brevity, selectiveness, propensity to extract parts from a whole, and particularly the *news values*. All these qualities of media communication process were already mentioned above. Anyone who wishes to get a message across through media must – with all humility – accept these limits of media communication and surrender to them. This applies even more to members of the Church invited to love their neighbors and serve the others. In that respect, they should see their neighbor also in a journalist who needs a two-sentence statement from them right now, fully informative, sufficiently metaphorical, concrete and, if possible, also expressive, emotional or a bit personal. At the end of the day, journalists do not need that content for themselves. They need such a material to satisfy their mass audiences which is then able to accept and process it.

The attitude of the Church to communication also shapes the state of the media owned by it. Many of them – and in Slovakia all of them – represent the so-called pastoral media, i.e. media which represent an instrument for spiritual and informational service for believers. Vladimír Slovák speaks about media as some kind of ‘church outpost’, which does not have any missionary ambition nor attempts to address people on the edge of faith or non-believers. He sees them as instruments which transmit what happens in the Church to those who would wish but cannot participate (TARINA, 1998). The Jesuit priest Petr Kolář in a book interview with Josef Beránek revives his memories of his experience at the Vatican Radio in the 1980s. He strongly felt the lack truly creative newscast, even a certain type of censorship – he was quite sensitive to – since this was the reason for his emigration from the socialist Czechoslovakia. “The radio fulfilled the role of a kind of Vatican press centre. “It was not journalism that was required, but a mere presentation of the official voice of the Vatican” (BERÁNEK, 2001, p. 100). One may follow that the Church’s relation to own media is the one of a corporation to its corporate press office – something, which is legitimate, all the more when this type of media has a stable audience and is usually financially self-sufficient in its printed form (such as the Slovak weekly *Katolícke noviny*). But the question is whether the content produced by such media can be described as journalism. In my previous works (2010, p. 172 – 182) on this topic I suggested, it cannot. Thus, one may therefore articulate the need for church media that would seek to fulfil the key function of journalism, i.e. “to inform and help people become better citizens” (2010, p. 132.). In addition, one should present the need for church officials capable of entering the journalistic communication in a journalistic manner. For example, when a chief editor of an e-zine writes a commentary – which a member of the church hierarchy does not agree with –

the correct approach to resolve this matter should not be a personal mail with a warning, but his own commentary published on the same website so that all arguments are considered and both sides of the dispute are heard. Thus, a room for discussion would ensue and this might lead to more matured citizenship.

### Some final reflective notes

In this respect, I would like to add several provocative thoughts on this topic – not to irritate but to satisfy my own hunger for answers to this quite intriguing question. In the Slovak context, I increasingly encounter comparisons of the Church's structures to the former Communist State Security (ŠtB)<sup>14</sup>, or the Communist party (KS) per se. Of course, this is a relatively bold synecdoche related to some of the selected practices within the Church's structures, ŠtB and KS.

I myself feel a strong dislike when I hear this comparison and I always tend to downplay or refuse it completely. Here, I would like to examine the cause of its popularity.

I encountered the first reference of this kind in a commentary written by the publisher of the *Zrno* (Grain) magazine, Michal Vaško<sup>15</sup>. It was released shortly after the local bishop revoked the *imprimatur* for *Zrno* in response to several controversial articles about ordination of women. When evaluating the *ad limina* visit of Slovak bishops of Pope Benedict XVI in June 2007, M. Vaško compared the rather empty words of understanding, consonance and internal unity to the conclusions from an Assembly of the Czechoslovak Communist Party, thus stirring a wave of emotions and rage in public debate. Since then I also stumbled upon some inadvertent conclusions 'isn't it all the same as back then?' articulated by several respected people with unpleasant personal experience with the State Security. Those making such comparisons always put 'hungry liberty' before 'satiated obedience'.

After a thorough examination I have arrived at the following five possible causes if this rather unflattering analogy:

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<sup>14</sup> The State Security is the Communist undercover intelligence agency operating in the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic drawing on the KGB model.

<sup>15</sup> *Zrno* is the only former Slovak Christian samizdat published until today under its original name. Founded in 1989 and later in 1994 renamed to Michal Vaško Publishing House (Vydavateľstvo Michala Vaška), it is known for efforts to raise awareness of internal church debate and constantly balancing on the edge of discussion and provocation. The dispute with the church hierarchy hit its climax in 2006 due to an article questioning priestly celibacy and suggesting ordination of women. In the same year, *Zrno* was deprived of the ecclesiastical approval and a difficult stage of its existence began. The distribution of the magazine in the churches ceased, lost many readers and its circulation took a dive and decreased to about a half, i.e. to about less than 3,000 units.

- creating blacklists;
- emphasis on loyalty;
- use of the 'anti-church' label;
- references to intervention from higher levels;
- defamation of potential martyrs.

The Church's structures have a thorough knowledge of the activities of priests and engaged believers – their media activities, presence at various events and other published opinionated content they publish. The focus is on the key areas of concern, to which the structures are sensitive or overly sensitive. Thus, imaginary lists of disloyal believers with greater or smaller black points are created in the course of time. These people are sometimes given a warning not to exaggerate or they receive a warning from their employer. The worst case is, of course, when such a person is a direct employee of a church institution.

This is closely related to the requirement of loyalty. Loyalty to bishops equals loyalty to the Church – this argument is specifically efficient in traditional Catholic communities such as within the Slovak milieu where the following axiom applies “he who bites the pope, dies”. A warning finger is usually raised when someone dares to criticise a cardinal or a bishop, for example, for his political views. Thus, those believers for whom loyalty to the bishop and the Church is of equal importance can be, in a sense, emotionally ‘blackmailed’. Of course, the underlying fallacy is mistaking hierarchy for the whole Church; V. Slovák concludes: “We prefer loyalty to professionalism. [...] But loyalty to the Slovak Catholic Church officials does not necessarily mean loyalty to the Catholic Church as such or to her teaching!” (SLOVÁK, 2009, p. 80 – 81).

Those with sufficient number of black points for their sins of disloyalty are given an antichurch label. That is exactly what happened to the Slovak dissident we already mentioned above, one of the leading figures of the pre-November underground church, František Mikloško<sup>16</sup>. From the onset of the ‘Bezák’s case’ in June 2012, Mikloško was the person playing the key role in unravelling the case. He was the one who first brought the report about the prepared removal of the Archbishop. He also kept on identifying the key causes of the removal including the alleged mishandling of funds leading all the way up to the Vatican. The Slovak church officials do not conceal that Mikloško is *a persona non grata*. In my view, Mikoško must be going through a real

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<sup>16</sup> František Mikloško was born in 1947. Before 1989 he worked as a mathematician in the Slovak Academy of Sciences, later as a shop-floor worker (since 1983). He was engaged in the so-called underground church. After the fall of Communism in November 1989, he was one of the key conservative politicians in Slovakia. In the period 1990 – 2010 he was a member of the Slovak parliament and chaired the Slovak parliament in 1990 – 1992. In 2004 and 2008, he ran for presidency of the Slovak Republic. In 2008 he left the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and co-founded a new party, Conservative Democrats of Slovakia.



*déjà vu*. In March 1988, he organized the famous Candle Demonstration, which delivered a decisive blow to the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia<sup>17</sup>. Back then, those in power labelled him in the media an anti-church element, whose acts solely at his own instigation and without the blessing of the church officials in charge.

It is a common experience of the members of the Church that potential deficiencies of an 'object' are reported immediately and – as a rule – directly to higher instances. The biblical principle of discussing a problem face-to-face first, then with a witness, and only afterward with the whole community seems to have completely evaporated. In December 2013, the Slovak government increased salaries of priests by 16 EUR. In reaction to this step, Filip Čierny, a Franciscan priest known for his media presence criticized on his video blog, the financial dependence of the Church and the humiliating 'bowing' of church officials before the state. His fellow brother living on the same corridor found his words exaggerated, and so he decided to send a letter directly to their superior. He asked that the media activity of his brother Filip is prohibited. I myself was too confronted with similar experience. After I published a scholarly article on marketing of the Catholic media in *Nové horizonty* (New Horizons), a quarterly theological and cultural review, the chief editor of the *Katolícke noviny* weekly, Ivan Šulík, sent an anxious letter about the lack of professionalism, incapacity and unethical actions directly to the rector of my university, the respective bishop as well as the chief editor of the quarterly review. When we discussed this matter at home, we arrived at a conclusion that the only addressee missing was the director of the planet...

Those with totalitarian power do not need martyrs (nor crowds that follow them). Therefore, as concluded by Cyril Vasil', they attempt to accuse their enemies of so-to-speak 'normal', non-ideological crimes (2014). One can follow this pattern in the fates of a number of political prisoners. Condemned priests and bishops were not accused of their fidelity to God. Based on their brave and selfless actions they were accused of treason, espionage, organizing a revolt, or one of the most favorite accusations of 'impeding the state control over the Church'. Any pretext for adding anti-Semitism, Aryanization or sabotage was used to increase the penalty. And that is exactly what we see in modern-day Slovakia. Those who do not 'hold the line' often face accusations from higher levels, some of which are truly on the edge of common sense. The story of R. Bezák, mentioned

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<sup>17</sup> Candle demonstration, also called the Bratislava Good Friday, which was a peaceful demonstration of citizens for religious and citizens' rights and freedoms in the socialist Czechoslovakia. It took place on 1988 in the Hviezdoslavovo square in Bratislava. This event can be regarded as the climax of the activities of the underground church in the Communist Czechoslovakia and a systemic beginning of the definitive fall of the Communist totalitarian regime in Slovakia, which followed 17 November 1989. By the drastic action taken by the Public Security troops (state police force) and the State Security (state intelligence service) against the protesters, the citizens' rights and freedoms, especially the freedom of assembly was seriously infringed.

many times in this text serves once again as a good example. Indeed, the notorious 'Eleven Questions'<sup>18</sup>, sent to R. Bezák by the Vatican Congregation for Clergy has added a tragicomic twist to this case.

Based on the communication patterns described above and present in the Church, those affected may get a sense they are treated "just like back then". However, such expressive and offensive comparisons – whether or not relevant – tend to deteriorate rather than improve the current state of affairs. As they do not represent a suitable communication instrument, I am convinced they should be rejected. However, in some forums or within certain contexts, they do have certain informative value and they are worthy of a deeper reflection and – indeed – a self-reflection too.

## Conclusion

I have attempted to analyze the Church – media relation based on my insights into both what annoys and what is welcomed by either of the parties. I have enumerated several potential causes and consequences of this phenomenon. Based on the above one may infer the following challenges faced by both parties: journalists are expected to seek a deeper knowledge of the church environment and the Church is expected to spread the atmosphere of understanding and openness. By knowledge I mean a grasp of the processes, terminology and rules within the Church. By depth I mean the willingness to put in an extra effort in discovering the value of a phenomenon or an event which *prima facie* does not seem to carry any *news value*. By understanding I mean accepting the rules of the craft of journalism, accommodating these rules and having the courage to be open and 'normal'. As psychologists use to say, this is the hardest thing to do...

In this respect a new question ensues: Is faith a prerequisite for a correct interpretation of church events? Does a journalist need to be a believer in order to correctly process a religious message and insert it to the correct frequency of his or her medium? Is *sentire cum Ecclesia* an inevitable condition of correctly informing about the Church and the Gospel? These questions were dealt with in my previous works. I concluded that an established empathy with the Church gives the journalist a head start for a successful transmission of a religious message (2010, p. 196).

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<sup>18</sup> The so-called 'Eleven Questions' is a part of the correspondence between the Archbishop Bezák and the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, which took place after the visit of the Trnava archdiocese beginning 2012. After publishing the document, many journalists find pleasure in pointing to questions about wearing jeans, taking shower in public showers or working out at gyms. The questions were first aired by the news television station TA3 on 16 July 2012, and they are available at <http://www.ta3.com/clanok/1002579/vatikan-sa-pytal-bezaka-aj-na-celibat-a-financovanie-arcidiecezy.html>.

However, this conclusion can be argued against and so would be very interesting to explore the question in more detail.

Finally, I would like to add a short disclaimer. Students attending my class on journalistic genres know well that a commentary is much more powerful when it provokes a discussion than any published material that uses worn-out clichés. This is equally true of any published reflection or argument. Should anyone find my statements all too concrete, expressive or one-sided, I would like to assure the reader that this perception might probably be ascribed to a habitual journalistic style I have developed. Therefore, I humbly ask the reader to perceive the above reflection as an honest attempt to seek the truth free of any malice or anti-church bias.

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