

Papal PR: all a cunning plan?



News

Riazat Butt: The pope's press man, Federico Lombardi, thinks papal gaffes have strengthened the church. Earth to Vatican: they haven't

Tuesday, 19 May 2009

Last night I had the pleasure of going to mass in search of Federico Lombardi, the Vatican's director of press, who was giving a lecture on communications. It doesn't take a genius, never mind a religious affairs correspondent, to think that the head of Vatican PR pontificating (ha) on communications is akin to Norway giving masterclasses on getting a joke. Lombardi, an Italian priest who started his press career on La Civiltà Cattolica, working his way up before replacing the long-serving Joaquin Navarro Valls in 2006, has come under sustained fire since taking over at the helm of the Holy See press office.

First there was Regensburg. Then there was the lifting of the excommunication of the Holocaust-denying priest Richard Williamson. I know the decision was unconnected to the Holocaust denial, but it's not that hard to Google, I do it before every date. Then there were unscripted remarks about condoms aggravating the spread of AIDS that were later edited to say something rather different. Bring in a bit of papal revisionism – he wasn't a member of the Hitler Youth, oh hang on yes he was – and an almost unintelligible speech that angered gay rights campaigners and dominated news cycles for 48 hours with little or no clarification from the Vatican and we have all the makings of what Catholic and non-Catholic commentators called a PR failure, carnage, nightmare and train wreck. But wait! Apparently, we/I/you/they got it wrong. Citing not so much divine intervention as the law of unintended consequences Lombardi said that Muslim-Christian relations were better because of Regensburg, that the Williamson episode had allowed the church to clarify and strengthen its position on antisemitism and Holocaust denial and that the pope's intervention on condoms was carefully crafted to allow deeper discussion and reflections on the topic.

"Once the first wave of criticism had passed, people were able to do some real hard thinking – and they did. The subsequent reflections were serious, penetrating and well-argued. "It took a while for word of them to reach the public, but eventually the public did hear about and really benefit from these contributions to the discussion."

Oh really? So the last three years have been one cunning plan? Not quite.

I am not saying everything we have done and are doing is perfect. We would be deluding ourselves if we thought that communication can always be controlled or conducted smoothly. Is there any great institution or personality that, finding itself constantly in the limelight, is not the object of frequent criticism? Why ought we to think that the pope ought to be an exception?

Fair dos, Lombardi, if you want to play with the big boys you have to expect bruises. Or something. But the media is also to blame, because we lead empty lives.

"Many journalists, and many news outfits are endlessly searching for the next big scoop, as though getting it right were the one thing that can give their existence some affirmation."

I know how that feels Federico because Alexandria was one big existential crisis for me. Oh please.

The Vatican press office has not done a good job of protecting its boss when things go wrong, as they often have in the last three years, and a little humility and contrition wouldn't go amiss. The Bible is full of it. Consider how tarnished the pope's reputation is. Despite the battering and onslaught, Lombardi shows no intention of changing tack, arguing that the church will often say things that go against the grain. I know there won't be a U-turn on abortion or euthanasia but I would have thought that the mistakes of the past could easily be rectified by using the internet, proof-reading a speech looking for howlers and barring the pope from making unscripted remarks.