

A Church Challenged: Reforming Our Communication System
by
Frances Forde Plude

[4545 College Road, Cleveland OH 44121; 216-373-5247]

Frances Forde Plude is a Communication Professor at Notre Dame College, Cleveland. She is a member of the International Study Commission on Media, Religion and Culture and Co-editor of the *Communication, Culture and Theology* book series published by Sheed and Ward. [fplude@ndc.edu]

Like millions of Catholics I am deeply concerned about the current Catholic Church crisis. And like many, I see the situation through a particular lens. This perspective is not based upon liberal or conservative views, however. Nor does it have to do with Church doctrine. Or with sexuality. Rather, as a communication specialist, I argue that our response to this crisis must be suffused and strengthened by a more enlightened understanding of how the Church, as a communication system, can be pastoral and effective in a media-overload world.

These thoughts are grounded in more than thirty years of professional and personal experience assisting corporate, government, and church leaders as well as grassroots groups improve their understanding of communication principles and practices. The Church must change to be more pastoral and honest inside the Church and to deal with a graced but hurting world.

Many individuals are prescribing cures based upon ideology. This is not necessarily bad. We should listen to many points of view and respect the professionalism and experience of people who offer ideas for our healing. Indeed, now is the time for Catholics (and others) to step up and offer their suggestions, their time, and their labor as we rebuild the Catholic community in the United States. It is a long-term task and we must stay on it.

As a global church, with a global problem, our horizon must be global. Many of the issues raised here relate to this wider church even as they arise from a unique U.S. culture with its multiple ethnic identities and its entrepreneurial individualism and efficiencies. As Americans view the current crisis, most of them identify the key problems as leadership accountability and damaged credibility. My perspective is that we are witnessing a huge communication crisis, a failure that did not happen suddenly. The communication flaws are systemic and, to some extent, caused by outside forces. How have past practices contributed to our present crisis? How must church communication change fundamentally in the future?

We might think of the ‘heart’ of the U.S. Catholic Church as a muscular organ with communication flowing through its veins and arteries. But some arteries are blocked, damaging the heart, resulting in a lack of energy and grace.

The first serious blockage is the lack of *dialogue* throughout the church. Media technologies have created a global “talk-back” culture. This was facilitated by the invention of the telephone more than a century ago, but as far back as the printing press invention, individual voices became empowered. At that time a Reformation occurred. Unless churches today come quickly to truly value feedback and two-way communication, religious authority will remain under siege just when global problems cry out for prophetic wisdom and courageous Gospel witness.

American Catholics, especially females, are demanding to be involved more directly in church administration and organizational decision-making. Catholics are already creating angry but healing forums in parishes around the country. The Second Vatican Council, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, provided a theology of lay empowerment – the priesthood of all the

baptized. However, current canon law does not encourage structures or procedures that allow much lay empowerment to happen.

An important communication question has always been and now is: whose voices are heard? When feedback is requested, is it respected? Are individuals being asked for their “expert” advice, only to have it ignored?

Communication professor Deborah Tannen of Georgetown University characterizes America as “an argument culture.” Many news programs, especially the round-the-clock types, are boisterously argumentative. This culture can be laborious and the feedback loops are rancorous at times. However, communication theorists and practitioners are getting better at facilitating dialogue forums. The Catholic Church should enlist their aid in developing a more creatively dialogical church culture. A willingness to do this will help restore leadership credibility. Some leaders are more comfortable with this than others; some are already truly dialogical. But few will deny that the clerical, hierarchical structure of the church has favored top-down communication flows.

Boston College has promised a systematic academic forum over a two-year period to examine issues of importance in the current crisis. This will include public lectures around the country, seminars for its campus community and alumni, ‘issue papers’ by scholars and for the general public, and the creation of special courses in ecclesiology and other areas.

An interesting precedent has been set by the Catholic Common Ground project. It generated heated dialogue when it started up but has fostered rich discussion since. Such projects do well to engage communication specialists who can facilitate the dialogic process with expertise. While confidentiality and discretion are at times necessary, credibility will be restored more quickly when the dialogue is open and transparent. Because the clerical, hierarchical

structure and culture of the Church has favored top-down messaging, this shift to open dialogue will be a challenge.

A second area of concern is the role of offices of communication. Many dioceses and other church groups have a communication officer, but most spend their time “putting out fires” and providing public relations “cover” when things go awry, helping bishops try to “manage” the media. These communication efforts need to go beyond that and come to permeate and support *all* church ministries for the church to be well served.

One type of Communication Workshop for diocesan leadership teams starts with individual meetings with each ministry office to discuss how communication efforts can support their work. Then the entire leadership team gathers for the Workshop, with the bishop, and together they design a communication program that is truly integrated, permeates all church ministries, and reaches out through dialogue to parish communities. This approach to communication promises better results than training bishops to be spin masters. It is not easy to design and implement a rich communication fabric within the church’s cloth, but when communication is seen as an isolated department it rarely seems important to the church-at-large and it is viewed as manipulative.

Another proposal submitted to the U.S. Catholic Conference Communication Committee suggested a regional and grassroots workshop model, designed by bishops and communication specialists “in the field,” one that could be held close to home dioceses. This would meet the needs of users because they themselves designed it. And its regional focus would control costs and minimize travel so entire leadership teams could attend together. Discussion materials could be designed, parish workshop models could be constructed, and a Web site could allow follow-up communication among workshop “graduates.” This model was rejected in favor of a higher

priced model that tends to focus on how to manage the media. Several years ago, more than 85% of the U.S. bishops noted their own need for communication training. It is now clearer than ever that this support is necessary, but centralized and slick approaches will not meet their needs and many bishops will simply not attend or will not fund bringing their leadership team to a costly training session.

Communication specialists point to a third blocked artery in the Church: the fact that faith communities are often unaware of the rich resource that today's media culture represents. The current crisis has provoked unreasonable media-bashing by a generation of church leadership largely formed by print culture. But the reality is that most of humanity now resides in the digital media world of film, TV programs, music, Internet content, and personal conversation on telephones or in Email.

One priest who has worked in media for many years describes media as both superficial and spiritual. "They are often, even usually, superficial in terms of ideas and truth. Movies are about images and emotions. But media are profoundly spiritual in the impact they have on our imaginations, our hearts, our values and our lifestyles." As Church we need to use media more intentionally. For example, in some parishes small groups gather regularly in homes to view films and discuss them together.

We need to support media artists and content and bring their work into our church life, even our worship. Studies show that most programming produced by in-house religious groups attracts relatively small audiences. It's time to move out into the culture in a positive way rather than simply considering this a dark and dangerous media world. The Church needs to be a patron of the arts today as in the past.

Another communication concern relates to seminary formation, and not just the issue of sexuality. People being trained in church leadership – both ordained and non-ordained – receive minimal exposure to media studies even though such study has been mandated by the Vatican. Most formation programs feel they have so much to cover they don't have time for "another course." Media education needs to be an integral part of the whole range of formation preparation.

In all these programs, it is important to move from seeing media as an *instrument* for getting church messages out, to recognizing the reality of media as *inculturation* – as a force that plays a powerful role in human lives. Research now shows there is much interaction between audiences and media programs. One scholar calls this process *mediation* – that individuals and societies actually alter and inform the media content as they absorb and redefine its meaning.

Finally, the developing field of Communication Theology is attempting to integrate communication studies and media studies into theological understanding. This can help leaders and parishioners achieve a deeper and healthier understanding of the role communication plays in people's relationship with God.

These reflections began by urging the Church to become a more robust communication *system*. It will require systemic change to restore Church credibility and witness. We need a dialogic culture within the Church, including a new type of communication office that is well integrated into all church ministries and linked to parish communities. We need to value the media culture we all 'swim' in and integrate this into the totality of our formation programs.

This essay's title, "A Church Challenged," is borrowed from the *New York Times* coverage of "A Nation Challenged" after the September 11th disasters. Within this concept the newspaper focused fact-finding and analysis during the crisis and suggested multi-layered and

nuanced solutions. This special *Times* section offered individual profiles of victims providing a method of seeing and hearing human voices from the disaster scene. This was a creative and powerful communication forum. The Church needs many such forums under the umbrella of “A Church Challenged.”

Our task is to seek out and profile individuals and programs in the Church that *are* truly communicating and sharing God’s love. Using communication more effectively can help us restore the heart of the Church, moving beyond top leadership ills to the multi-faceted and gifted voices of people who *are* the Church.