



APOSTOLIC VICARIATE  
OF SOUTHERN ARABIA  
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

## SEMINAR REPORT

# XI PROFESSIONAL SEMINAR FOR CHURCH COMMUNICATORS: DIALOGUE, RESPECT AND FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION IN THE PUBLIC ARENA

The recent Seminar for Church Communicators organised by the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (PUSC) in Rome from 17-19 April 2018 brought together some very fine minds who led discussions on the current challenges revolving around the themes of dialogue, respect and freedom of expression in a post-truth world. The fact that almost 400 church communicators from all over the world took part in this conference highlighted the esteem and trust which both communication professionals and local churches place in this bi-annual seminar which boldly brings relevant topics and challenges to the floor.

Presented below are some points from our notes on the seminar:

### INTRODUCTION: PROF. JORDI PUJOL

The introductory session was given by Prof. Jordi from the PUSC. Fr. Jordi tried to explore the meanings of the key words of the seminar and how they are to be practically applied. This session was very informative and helped us to understand what the terms dialogue, respect and freedom of expression meant in very simple and direct terms.

#### On Dialogue:

*“The real meaning of dialogue is not formal correctness.”*

*“Dialogue implies openness, tolerance, being constructive, able to listen.”*

*“Being aware of the danger of a closed mind: it is oriented to resistance, is deaf to the ideas of others, to new solutions. A closed mind prevents creative thinking.”*

#### On Respect:

*“Respect for a person is a moral absolute.”*

*“Rejection of an idea does not mean that you reject a person.”*

*“On the other hand, being nice or politically correct does not mean that you really respect a person.”*

*“The Public Arena is a neutral space where all men have a right to public dignity.”*



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### On Freedom of Expression:

*“Freedom of expression goes within the scope of respect.”*

*“It is not a freedom to offend.”*

*“Take note: New generations sometimes put freedom of expression and inclusion on a par!”*

### **HISTORY OF FREEDOM OF EXPRESSION: PROF. RICHARD JOHN**

Drawing from lessons learnt from US history, Prof. Richard R. John (The Columbia Journalism School) talked on how the important value of freedom of expression took shape and how, from some potentially constructive and destructive uses, the right application of this fundamental value was understood. Freedom of expression is to be rooted in toleration and pluralism. While freedom of expression is praiseworthy, we should remind ourselves that it always remains a means to an end rather than an end in itself, and to be placed at the service for individual and social betterment.

*“We may disagree on many things, but we should agree to promote freedom of expression, both in universities and in society.”*

### **PASSWORDS FOR PUBLIC DEBATE: JUAN PABLO CANNATA**

This title of this very interesting session was really appropriate. Juan Cannata talked about how we are called to intelligently reframe our arguments using new language (the passwords) which if correctly used, can help the communicator to transcend cultural, religious, philosophical barriers to touch the audience with his or her messages.

*“Move from the context of "threat" to the context of "opportunity"!”*

*“While communicating Christian values in a pluralistic society, try to reframe, find a new language which can change how these values are perceived by secular culture.”*

*“Every communicator or communications outlet should first of all work to increase their legitimacy. Building trust is crucial.”*

*“While addressing sensitive issues, try to find the best wording, the best formula that will touch the heart of the public.”*



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### **GENERATING PUBLIC DIALOGUE THROUGH SOCIAL NETWORKS [PANEL]**

On the panel, we listened to experiences from those in charge of social networks of four major Church bodies - Opus Dei (Spain), the Dominicans (Peru), Salesians (Italy) and Shalom Community (Brazil).

Here are some excerpts:

#### **Opus Dei**

*“Understand the type of people on our social media platforms and use the proper tone and voice to welcome and foster dialogue. Creating specific content for each group of people with specific needs – this will enrich the conversation.”*

#### **The Dominicans**

*“Involve in political debates; facilitate transparent dialogue for better relations, peace for all. Stand with our people on crucial issues. Get rid of our “cliché”, the preconception of our audience that the Catholic Church always talks only about a particular subject.”*

#### **The Shalom Community**

*“Our experience shows us that testimony is more effective than preaching. At the same time, in today's world credibility of content is crucial: practise what you preach.”*

*“Dialogue with respect, but without losing your identity.”*

*“Social networks could be effectively used as “virtual” evangelisation channels for young people: use new media “with” young people rather than “for” young people.”*

### **BUILDING A CULTURE OF ENCOUNTER IN SOCIAL MEDIA: JACK VALERO [PAPER]**

The Project “Catholic Voices” came into being in preparation for the visit of Pope Benedict to the United Kingdom in 2010. Austein Ivereigh and Jack Valero took the initiative to team up with several committed communication professionals who after months of preparation, addressed arguments from lobbies which opposed the Pope’s Visit. After the eminent success of the project, Catholic Voices spread to several other countries. Here are some excerpts from the paper by Catholic Voices co-founder Jack Valero at the seminar:



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OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

*“Building a culture of encounter on social media requires a dual effort: on the one hand, being alive to the particular dehumanising temptations it presents; on the other, deliberately choosing to act in ways that build virtues which resonate with our audience.”*

*“We have one life, which is both physical and digital; People on social networks “must make an effort to be authentic since, in these spaces, it is not only ideas and information that are shared, but ultimately our very selves.”*

*“Communicating in the digital world no longer means transmitting and broadcasting but engaging and sharing.”*

*It is important to note that social media doesn't just build bridges, but often creates walls. We are called to be ourselves, but not obsessed with ourselves. As a Catholic sharing your faith with others who are not Catholic or religious, it is good to keep in mind their perception of the Church as rules-obsessed, tradition-bound, and “dogmatic.” Feed these prejudices, and people stop listening!*

*“The truth by itself doesn't persuade – we're just offering one answer among many – unless it is couched in terms that reflect our faith. Pope Francis invites us to communicate with mercy – to stress not what has already been well heard, but the part that hasn't got through: the compassion of God, the unconditional embrace of others, our shared dignity and humanity, and so on. If people are wounded, the first thing they need to hear from the Church is healing; only later will they be ready to talk about the cause of the wounds.”*

*“A digital ‘culture of encounter’: “It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply ‘connected’; connections need to grow into true encounters - we cannot live apart, closed in on ourselves. We need to love and be loved. We need tenderness.”*

*“People only express themselves fully when they are not merely tolerated, but know that they are truly accepted. If we are genuinely attentive in listening to others, we will learn to look at the world with different eyes and come to appreciate the richness of human experience as manifested in different cultures and traditions.”*

#### **COMMUNICATING THE FAMILY: ABP. EAMON MARTIN**

Archbishop Eamon Martin, Bishop of Armagh and Primate of All Ireland, delivered a passionate address on the preparations underway on the World Meeting of Families planned to be held in Dublin in August 2018. Abp. Martin talked about coverage in the media regarding the Meeting up to the present, the key themes surrounding the catholic understanding of the family that will be at the centre of the meeting – such as self-giving love, respect for life, prayer, mercy and truth. Though there has also been some opposition from groups who do not share the catholic vision of the family, the church tries to be positive but at the same time emphasizes that this is a meeting of Catholics to discuss the Catholic understanding of the Family.

*“The World Meeting of Families 2018 is the first opportunity we all have since the Synod to talk about very crucial matters and important questions concerning families. We will share the*



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OF SOUTHERN ARABIA  
OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

*“Gospel of the family”, a joy for the whole world! We will talk about self-giving love in marriage, the importance of prayer, the Christian message of mercy and truth in families, the Irish practise of visiting homes, the safe-guarding of children and many other timely and important topics.”*

*“We have to find new ways of communicating in the family life – in the World Meeting, we communicate the Catholic vision of the family through families themselves.”*

*“Some of the current issues facing the Irish Church such as child abuse and forced adoptions will be discussed. We will also discuss regarding the safe-guarding of children, even for families.”*

*“The Church’s vision of the family is best communicated by families. It is in the family where we are first loved, where values are transmitted, where we learn of our connections with the past.”*

#### **ONGOING VATICAN COMMUNICATIONS REFORM: MONS. LUCIO ADRIAN RUIZ**

Mons. Lucio Adrian Ruiz, Secretary of the Dicastery for Communications of the Vatican, talked about the ongoing reform of communications portal. A guiding theme of Vatican communications reform has been to improve upon the ability to “accompany the user” as they seek information on Church communications. He showcased the recently redesigned Vatican communications portal [www.vaticannews.va](http://www.vaticannews.va) which serves as a hub for Vatican News, Media, and Radio Vaticana Italia.

In the situation where there is a lot of fake news concerning statements from the Holy Father, Mons. Ruiz underlined the importance of going to the source if we truly want to know what the Pope really said.

*“Recent events do show us that Communications cannot be reduced to just media or technology. Communication is catechesis, communication is pastoral care!”*

#### **ARE OUR VALUES CONVERSATIONS SUFFICIENTLY OPEN AND FREE? PROF. MARGARET SOMMERVILLE**

Margaret Sommerville, Professor of Bio-ethics at the Univeristy of Notre Dame, Australia had quite a lot to say on the subject of ethics, values, courage, the importance and usage of the right words and the importance of relying on conventional wisdom.



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OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

### On Courage

*“Communications in all its forms to be effective must be at the service of the truth.” Pope Francis*

*“Courage is a crucial element against hate speech - it is very dangerous when people are intimidated and are not willing to say what they actually believe.”*

### On using the right words

*“Words matter! A Catholic communicator’s job on ethical issues is to give people the words they need to say what they believe - suggesting ‘languages’ to express values in a friendly and respectful way, without hostility.”*

### On marriage

*“Marriage is a compound right – men and women have the rights to marry and form a family.”*

### On living in a culture that seems to be “youth-obsessed”

*“The word of the year 2017 is ‘youthquake’, which means a ‘significant cultural, political, or social change arising from the actions or influence of young people.’”*

*“We live in a culture that is youth-obsessed. There is no respect for the wisdom of the elders.”*

*“Aboriginal Australians have a tradition of looking back seven generations and looking forward seven generations before they take any major decisions. Bringing that into context, let us look at a typical issues the world today is facing – the disposal of nuclear waste. Aboriginals say that if you ask us about this question, we would reply that we would first have looked backward and forward seven generations before going down the nuclear path. So we would never have had this problem.”*

*“We want to remain young, so we adopt young people’s values which could be sometimes come at a great cost, especially if we ignore the lessons of the past.”*

### **RELIGIOUS INFORMATION IN A FAKE NEWS SOCIETY: MICHAEL WARSAW, CEO, EWTN**

Michael P. Warsaw is the Chairman of the Board & Chief Executive Officer of EWTN. He has held senior management positions in the areas of television production, satellite operations, and technical services, working directly with Mother Angelica, the network’s founder, on all of her major initiatives. In 2017, Pope Francis appointed him as a Consultor to the Vatican’s Secretariat for Communications.



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OFFICE OF COMMUNICATIONS

According to Warsaw, in today's post-truth world, the public is becoming increasingly skeptical of what is presented by the media as data, whether in terms of analysis or even as objective facts. This general distrust is one of the key factors behind the growth and spread of fake news as opposed to real news.

Citing an example from the U.S. presidential election of 2016 and related news being spread with regard to statements claiming to come from Pope Francis, Warsaw illustrated how this became the single biggest fake news hit of the U.S. election.

On today's consumption of "Fake News"

"Consumers of fake news are no small minority - therefore, it is crucial that those who work in social communications must be offered ongoing formation, both spiritual and professional, so that both individual journalists and media outlets become more trusted by the public and are seen as objective and reliable."

The mission of journalists in the world today

*"Journalists in particular are called to be 'the protectors of news.'"*

#### **MEDIA AND DIALOGUE - BETWEEN POLARITY AND POLARISATION: PROF. CHIARRA GIACCARDI**

Chiara Giaccardi is a professor of Sociology and Media Anthropology at the Catholic University of Milan, where she also directs the magazine of Social Communications.

Chiara cautioned against recent trends of the rise of a "war-like" approach in communications and the need to avoid polarization in dialogue. Dialogue is not to be a struggle for supremacy, but is about exploring new ways of understanding where everyone has something to gain. In dialogue, we should be careful not to give way to an abstractness or in doing away with uniqueness of people. It is essential to have a "healthy polarity" to bring forth valid points from a unique and personal perspective in a dialogue but at the same time, we should be careful to avoid "polarization" where we hold on to one's own point of view without recognizing legitimate truths present in the point of view of the other. In polarized environments, we are not witnessing dialogue but the negation of the other.

As an example, Chiara brought up the topic of women's rights. 'WomensRights' is NOT achieved by combat or proactive movements. Men and women are unique. The value of the uniqueness of women must always be enhanced by being a positive model. Men must not be "annihilated" but must be challenged to grow and take responsibility. A way to overcome limits that present themselves in dialogue is by discovering new points of balance which can serve to build bridges rather than walls.



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## On Fake News and war-like approach to communications

*“Fake News is often the fire-arms in the "battle field" of communication!!!”*

## The importance of humility in dialogue

**“When we have the humility to engage in dialogue, we realize that though we are speaking the truth, we know that there can be more to what we are saying.”**

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