

Religious Messages in the Media

Religious Messages in the Media:

Mission Impossible?

By

Terézia Rončáková

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This book is dedicated to prof. Peter Olekšák, founder of the Department of Journalism at the Catholic University in Ružomberok. Sixteen years ago, he was the first to encourage me to engage in journalistic studies in addition to my work as a journalist.

This book is also dedicated to prof. Tadeusz Zasępa, a Polish priest with a fatherly heart, who passed away prematurely in 2016. He inspired me with enthusiasm and a love for journalism, theology, and, above all, for our fellow human beings.

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CHAPTER 1

SACRUM VS. PROFANUM: OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS IN THE CHURCH-MEDIA RELATIONSHIP

How does the profane media treat the sacred message?

The question of the relationship between the church and the media has been one of the most widely discussed topics by both the general public and scholars since the emergence of the first printed periodicals. With the rise of electronic media such as radio and television, the interest in this topic and the intensity of the debate have increased significantly. A further impetus has come from the growth of media research activity in the mid-20th century related to growing concerns about the use of propaganda and manipulation. More specifically targeted research into the relationship of media and religion also emerged in the 1980s. The coexistence of mass media and the church is an attractive subject for academics due to the existence of a sort of ‘subliminal’ conflict between the two. This conflict has been widely examined and has led to many interesting and thought-provoking results¹, and thus any attempt to characterize this co-existence—which is by no means trouble-free—or explore which of the two sides is most negatively impacted by this conflict would be neither productive nor useful. This chapter will therefore address instead the causes of the current situation, drawing on generally accepted facts and the extensive experience of a typical media consumer, and will aim to provide several valuable insights based on my previously published research (Rončáková 2009a, 2009b, 2010, 2012, 2013b).

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 of

¹ For an overview of earlier research, see Chapter 2 and Andok 2018.

these causes, I will then turn my attention to the consequences. Finally, I will add a short provocative reflection of my own.

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 causes irritation among journalists:

- withdrawnness and silence
- arrogance
- hypocrisy.

Nothing irritates journalists more than the reluctance of church officials to provide information and give opinions on important issues. It is a journalists' bread and butter to cover these issues but without the cooperation with the officials they are simply unable to do their work. More specifically, at bishops' conferences or at bishops' offices journalists are often confronted by a 'none-of-your-business' approach on the part of the officials. Journalists often feel that they are faced with a kind of *secretum* as if everything is exclusively an internal affair of the Church. As a result, journalists can acquire and spread the impression 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, believing that life inside the ghetto must be really hard. In April 2014, when the rector of the Catholic University in Ružomberok, Slovakia, uncovered widespread corruption, including serious financial irregularities and the questionable granting of academic titles, one radio editor invited several bishops, whose names were frequently mentioned in the media in connection with the case, to participate in a panel discussion on the topic but the bishops refused to participate. The bishops were themselves full of anger, disgust and mutual resentment, and were in no way inclined to quarrel in front of a microphone. Others did not feel sufficiently familiarised with all the facts, given the complexity of the series of audits and court proceedings. But the editor was quick to determine an alternative diagnosis: fear. In such an unapproachable institution as the Catholic Church, he believed, they must all be trembling 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. As a result, bridges are burnt and

doors are slammed closed for a prolonged period of time. One figure who has unfortunately acquired the reputation of being arrogant 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, reached a wide audience. Mikloško was the first person to mention publicly the planned removal of the Archbishop of Trnava Róbert Bezák² to which the spokesperson of the bishops' conference laconically responded that it was nonsense and that Mikloško "offers plots similar to those of Dan Brown". Several hours later, the removal became a reality and Kováčik wears his Dan Brown label to this day.

In respect to church officials, hypocrisy is viewed by the media as the most critical category. This category is the unifying *leitmotiv* of earlier 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.³ When the media hunt for sensational stories and break the misdemeanours of the church hierarchy and spiritual or lay believers, the key phenomenon at work here is the disappointment of hypocrisy. The key driver is not prejudice or hatred of the Catholic Church but rather of reproach for their preaching water and drinking wine. A desire to change things can also be identified, a wish that the church remain faithful to its teaching and thus become a beacon; that it remain shining despite the fact that it is often bypassed. As the above-mentioned story of corruption at the Slovak Catholic University began to unfold, the 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." The stakeholders are well aware of this heightened attention, but as to whether it is better to avoid this scrutiny or face up to it—that is a different question.

WHAT IS WELCOMED BY JOURNALISTS?

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

² The "Bezák case" is described in detail in Chapter 3.

³ 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 research on the classical rhetorical category of *topoi*, or *loci comuni*—a subject which is the topic of Chapter 3.

- openness, ‘normalcy’
- provocative character.

Based on my extensive research into the media coverage of what is, historically, one of the most unprecedented (and still pending) church cases in Slovakia—the case of the removal of Archbishop R. Bezák (Rončáková 2013a, 2013c) from office—I reached the conclusion that the second most powerful underlying argumentation scheme for the secular media in covering this story was openness (the most powerful was justice because the removal from office was generally considered to be unjust; the difference between the aforementioned two *topoi* was just one percent⁴). Two mutually contradictory vectors ensued from these 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” (Rončáková 2013c, 30). The approach of the Slovak mainstream tabloid daily *Nový Čas*, and more specifically of the editor Zuzana Šišovská, is quite symptomatic. In a documentary aired by Czech television about R. Bezák⁵, she could be seen in a friendly and light-hearted confrontational discussion with the Archbishop prompting him (unsuccessfully) to allow himself be photographed in a fitness centre. Despite the Archbishop’s refusal to provide her with such tabloid material, his behaviour toward her was clearly humane and she in turn showed him respect. 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’s *Nový Čas* which became one of his most vocal 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 among the tabloid press.

A provocative character is perfectly compatible with the classic journalistic rule: “It doesn’t make news when a dog bites a man, but when a man bites the dog”. It is not that provocative communicators are amoral; they simply wish to satisfy the media requirement to provide the audience with something unusual or unexpected and thus interesting. Provocative communicators could be thought of as free minds that have the necessary courage to articulate and spread unconventional, courageous and, at the same time, simple and understandable ideas, quite often using figurative

⁴ The *topos* of justice appeared in 35% of the examined material, the *topos* of openness in 34%. The research is presented in detail in Chapter 3.

⁵ A film directed by Peter Minařík, *Arcibiskup s lidskou tváří* (Archbishop with A Human Face), shot in 2012.

language. The role of such ‘provocateurs’ is often taken up by priests who, quite interestingly, somehow manage to provoke quite a lot of people to think about God and religion in general. When I explored this remarkable phenomenon in more detail (Rončáková 2013e), I concluded *inter alia* that what these evangelists have in common was a love of non-believers or non-practicing Christians and the kind of charisma to approach them in the right way. At the same time, however, they can be regarded in some sense as prophets who manifest the ancient truth that the making of prophesies is meant to provoke. A typical example of a priest–provocateur in the Czech and Slovak setting is the young Premonstratensian, Karol Lovaš.⁶ This former journalist who underwent a radical conversion and decided to devote his life to God now 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.” It is, of course, no surprise that he is regarded within church circles as a *persona non grata*. The fact that he is ‘media-friendly’ is the cause and at the same time a consequence of this conflict.

WHAT ANNOYS THE CHURCH?

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

- mystery of faith and reverence vs. investigative nature, exposing, irony
- eternal continuity vs. innovation
- unity, reconciliation vs. conflict
- abstract spirituality vs. a tangible and concrete message
- hierarchy, authoritativeness vs. democracy, dissent

⁶ Karol Lovaš publishes his Sunday reflections, poems, interviews and photographs at <http://www.bratsavol.sk>.

- complexity, technical language vs. superficial coverage
- evangelisation, faith vs. generally understandable content.

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

- disinterest
- ignorance
- tabloid nature of coverage.

Obviously, disinterest among the media would annoy any institution that aims to attract the attention of the general public to its activities. Disinterest is often seen by church officials as deliberate or based on prejudice, but it is questionable whether these phenomena are indeed at work. It may 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 are interesting, you'll get through our filter; if you're not, you won't. The filter here is the so-called *news value*, i.e. the qualities or values which are necessary 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, which are termed differently by various scholars, including elitism, oddity, unexpectedness, spatial proximity, storyline, etc. As Diego Contreras⁷, a media expert of the Papal University Santa Croce in Rome, has argued, 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 require deeper investigation, but these require more effort to be presented in an interesting and understandable manner. In one of my previous works (Rončáková 2010, 49), I called these '*gospel values*' and identified them as virtues. Righteousness, fidelity, generosity, self-sacrifice, kindness, patience or humility can also arouse interest in modern audiences, although more effort is required to cover them in an attractive manner. A great carrier of such a message—one which also corresponds to the requirements of media language—is the story. Other starting points have been sought and examined in detail in my other works (Rončáková 2009a, 2009b, 2010). It should be noted here that the method of overcoming the disinterest of media is twofold. One is to engage in

⁷ Author's personal research interview with D. Contreras in November 2008.

professional journalistic coverage to convey events based on *gospel values* and, at the same time, overcome fears of classic *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 output when the aforementioned silence is broken in an inappropriate fashion. One issue that raises ire and which often becomes the subject of criticism is the misuse of church terminology by journalists who are not familiar with church language and the church 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’ or terminological errors such as ‘to consecrate a new saint’ or ‘to 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: the drive to employ smaller numbers of younger and cheaper staff, a feature of the media landscape which negatively impacts not only the coverage of church matters but also of other more sophisticated topics. This, however, is a much broader issue which lies beyond the scope of this text and is addressed by sociological works focused on the journalistic profession and its future development.⁸

Another striking and notoriously recurrent mistake of media output covering church-related topics is the loss of message. This phenomenon has been referred to in a number of studies.⁹ Research shows that at mass-scale national pilgrimage events, papal visits abroad or similar events, the media effectively filter out the spiritual message or any deeper thoughts brought about through such events. On the other hand, what does attract media attention is, for instance, the price of souvenirs, the number of attendees injured, environmentalists’ protests, the lunch menus of the clergy and so on. It is approaches such as these which church officials have in mind when they use the derogative term ‘tabloid’ coverage. Under the term ‘tabloid’ they understand, among others, a partiality of vision (i.e. the ability to see only one portion of the whole, a view which is often unrepresentative), misinterpretation (an emphasis on aspects far beyond the essential point) and sensationalism. Concerns over this approach then determine the attitude of the Church to the media, but the reluctance of the clergy to expose to this danger is definitely by no means a new phenomenon. The First Vatican

⁸ See also Brečková and Šrámek 1991; Jiráček 2007; Brečka 2010, 2011; Brečka, Ondrášík and Keklak 2010.

⁹ For the most recent research see also Coman 2014 and Kolková 2008.

Council (1869–1870), for instance, imposed an informational embargo on media releases during the Council in an effort to avoid inaccuracies and distortions. Conversely, this led to even more distorted news releases based on information from third parties, rumours and conjecture. In an effort to overcome this problem, the Second Vatican Council created a Council press office and set clear rules for media contact, although the organisers of press conferences and discussions had to regularly overcome the fears of the prelates that they would become easy prey for simplifying and superficially-thinking journalists.¹⁰

WHAT IS WELCOMED BY THE CHURCH?

The answer to the question of what the church welcomes in the approach of journalists is quite simple: sufficient media space and a positive media image. The approach of the Catholic 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, we might pose the question of 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 contact with God through media. This question, however, should be set within the framework of reflections about the evangelising potential of media, an issue which is beyond the scope of this work. An answer to this question has been sought in a number of previous studies (Rosenthal 2007; Lapko 2008; Celli 2009a, 2009b; Dulles 2009; Dluhý 2013; Rončáková 2013d) and the findings more or less converged on the assertion that the media was not a suitable and practical instrument for direct conversion. They may help to keep the faith alive, but this is the domain of a specific religious journalistic style. It seems that common secular media and the expressions thereof are limited to generating a positive image of the church. These findings have gradually eroded the church's initial ambitions and hopes of seeking new evangelisation strategies through media.

¹⁰ For a comprehensive and compelling depiction of the 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.

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, I would like here to point to four:

- a monopoly on interpretation
- the concept of ‘home kitchen’
- black-and-white vision
- the perception of the 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 internal problems with distrust or disrespect. When the chief editor of the well-known Slovak conservative website www.postoy.sk¹¹ wrote an analysis of the aforementioned case of the Catholic University in Ružomberok, he received an email from a prominent church official the point of which can be summarised as follows: “With all respect, sir, you have no idea.” Similar situations occur regularly even in relation to more significant topics related mainly to internal conflicts within the church. The story of the removal of Archbishop Bezák in this context does not even need to be mentioned. It is an exemplary case demonstrating the refusal of any published explanation by using the argument that the public does not have any chance to gain a reasonable insight or obtain an understanding of any problem within the Church. The telling phrase “you have no clue” is used as if it was to reinforce the authority of the one who *knows* but who refuses to say. According to M. Coman (Coman 2014), a Romanian sociologist and journalism theorist who studies media rituals and how the media take on certain roles traditionally played by religion, the essence of religious communication is revelation: he who reveals *knows*. But the media are also in the position of *those who know*—and this might be one source of conflict between media and the church.

¹¹ Since its inception in 2005, the website has professionalised significantly and in 2015 it was renamed Postoj Conservative Daily; today, it is regarded as a respected opinion-shaping Slovak medium.

The concept of the ‘home kitchen’ or ‘laundry room’ points to popular comparisons of the church to a family. A family sticks together; family members mutually support each other; a family speaks with one voice; a family sorts out all of its troubles at home and does not bring things out into the open; and, most importantly, a family does not resolve problems, such as the father’s alcoholism or his wife’s infidelity, through the tabloid press. A unity (at least an external unity) is at work in the church’s approach to difficulties. It almost works as a magic formula. Efforts to preserve this approach 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 also one of the most significant in the discourse related to the removal of R. Bezák. Within the analysed texts on this topic published by the Slovak weekly *Katolícke noviny*¹², the *topos* of unity achieved a 20% share in the examined texts. The argumentation scheme of unity emphasises the values of peace, cohesion, brotherly love and reconciliation. Any division within the Catholic Church was presented as bad and unity with the church as key—with a value exceeding any personal interest or injustice (Rončáková 2013c, 31). In the eyes of the proponents of such an approach, the actions of Pope Francis erode this principle, for example through his excessive public criticism of priests and consecrated persons. 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 Catholic Church speaks to a crowd of 50 thousand pilgrims—a crowd which may include perhaps 1 % of priests and 0.2 % of 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 the deficiencies of the teaching staff. He would then go on and emphasise the areas in which they should improve in an effort to make the learning process more efficient and improve the results. How then can the teacher stand up in front of his class and retain his authority?” (Fogaš 2014). It seems that the need to preserve authority with respect to the laity is the underlying motive of such an approach. P. Fogaš concludes his commentary with the following call: “Shouldn’t it be the other way around? Shouldn’t the boss encourage the employees at a meeting to respect the authorities—and

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

shouldn't he enumerate their deficiencies, discipline them and criticise, speak with them behind the closed door (the Pope with bishops and priests, bishops with priests, directors with teachers, owners with trainers)?" The commentator then openly speaks about a kind of nostalgia of the clergy for Benedict XVI and the related 'home laundry'. The approach of 'cooking 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, has informed the public on numerous occasions that this agenda is "currently being prepared within the competent committees". Here, a potential public discussion is regarded as an undesired interference in the negotiations. The idea is as follows: any discussion in the media is completely unacceptable because the media would attempt to take the reins and influence the processes.

When examining the black-and-white vision which is strongly present in the attitudes of the representatives of the Church but also among common lay believers, a reference is often made to the period of Communism (i.e. a period ending 25 years ago), an experience which taught people to discern between friends and enemies, between the good guys and the bad guys with no grey areas in between. This leads to those on the other side of the barricade being cast into a 'box'. No attempt to break from this rigid way of thinking seems to 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 acceptance of this invitation could be understood positively as a welcome effort on his part to enter into a dialogue. However, the mere presence of his name on the invitation in media coverage acted more as a red rag on the audience. Over and over again, the organisers heard questions such as: "...okay, fine—but why Hvorecký...?!" It seems as if a bipolar interpretation of reality was considered a much more 'energy-efficient' solution than any attempt to distinguish between the shades of gray. However, it is questionable whether this pattern can be described (solely) as an inheritance of the Communist period. In the 1960s, Ladislav Hanus, a significant Slovak theologian and culture philosopher, used the phrase 'the fanaticism of truth' in his work entitled *Princíp pluralizmu* ('The Principle of Pluralism'; Hanus 1997, 111). Hanus argued that 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 the one hand, one can hear the militant rhetoric against the “culture of death” and a “caressing dialogue” attempting to achieve an understanding, empathy and consent for one’s opponents by all means possible. For Hanus, one way out of this impasse is to use non-caressing dialogue as a path between the Charybdis of fanaticism and the Scylla of indifference. As Juraj Šúst¹³, the philosopher and current chairman of the Ladislav Hanus Fellowship concluded and pro-family protests will bear fruit if and when the community pursues them with clear, but at the same time, open and inviting attitudes. This means that the key to success lies in the ability to enter into a *relationship* with ‘the others’. This is the answer to the apparent 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 the binding nature of their own statements. It is as if every word they utter ought to have the gravity of Holy Scripture. They do this because of their own experience with believers, many of whom do actually see their statements in this way. Priests are therefore afraid to confuse people by commenting on topics with statements which may be 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 does not represent a majority view within the community of local bishops. The rule ‘do not confuse people’ becomes almost like a mantra which precludes the church media from publishing any questionable content or providing a platform for different opinions, and also dissuades them from making provocative or explicitly off-the-wall statements. If, in exceptional cases, this happens, such statements are 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 cannot discern between an opinion and a news item or that he lacks the mental capacity to evaluate information and orientate himself. In an atmosphere like this, many bishops and priests do not feel sufficiently free and therefore decline to expose their own subjective attitudes to current affairs. No Slovak bishops, for example, are bloggers. This simple fact

¹³ Ladislav Hanus Fellowship (SLH) is a Catholic academic fellowship whose mission is to draw inspiration from the great thinkers of Western civilisation, and to develop discussion, argumentation, leadership skills, the spiritual life, relationships and friendships. It was founded in Bratislava in 2002 inspired by the Washington-based Witherspoon Fellowship and offers a semester study and formation courses and various other activities. For more details please visit www.slh.sk.

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 church media.

The aforementioned causes lead to (1) a 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 a lack of desired content appearing in the media. It should be remembered that the established media code of conduct also includes qualities such as promptness, brevity, selectiveness, a propensity to extract parts from a whole, and particularly the *news value*. All of these qualities of the media communication process have already been mentioned above. Anyone who wishes to get a message across through the media must—with all humility—accept these limits of media communication and surrender to them. This applies even more so to members of the church invited to love their neighbours and serve others. In that respect, they should see their neighbour also in a journalist who needs a two-sentence statement from them right now; a statement fully informative, sufficiently metaphorical, concrete and, if possible, also expressive, emotional or with a personal element. At the end of the day, journalists do not need that content for themselves. They need such material to satisfy their mass audiences which are then also able to accept and process it.

The attitude of the Church towards media communication also shapes the state of the media which it owns. Much of this Church media—and in Slovakia all of the outlets—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 a kind of ‘church outpost’ which does neither has any missionary ambition nor attempts to address people on the edge of faith or non-believers. He sees them as instruments which disseminate what happens in the Catholic Church to those who would wish to participate but are unable to do so (Tarina 1998). In a book interview with Josef Beránek, the Jesuit priest Petr Kolář reminisces about his experience at the Vatican Radio in the 1980s. He strongly felt the lack of a truly creative newscast, or even of a certain type of censorship; an issue

which he was quite sensitive to since this was the reason for his emigration from 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, 100). One may follow that the Church’s relationship to her own media is that of a corporation to its corporate press office—an arrangement which is legitimate, especially 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 (Rončáková 2010, 172-182) on this topic, I have suggested that 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” (Rončáková 2010, 132.). In addition, one should also stress the need for church officials capable of entering 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 of the arguments can be considered and both sides of the dispute be heard. Thus, a platform for discussion would ensue and this might lead to a more mature citizenship.

SOME FINAL REFLECTIVE NOTES

In this respect, I would like to add several provocative thoughts on this topic—not to irritate the reader but rather to satisfy my own hunger for answers to this quite intriguing question. In the Slovak context, I increasingly encounter comparisons of the Catholic Church’s structures to the former Communist State Security (ŠtB)¹⁴ or the Communist Party (KS) per se. Of course, this is a relatively bold synecdoche related to some similarities in some selected practices within the church’s structures, the ŠtB and the KS.

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

¹⁴ The State Security was the Communist undercover intelligence agency operating in the former Czechoslovak Socialist Republic whose practices drew on the KGB model.

I encountered the first reference of this kind in a commentary written by the publisher of the *Zrno* (Grain) magazine, Michal Vaško.¹⁵ It was released shortly after the local bishop had revoked the *imprimatur* for *Zrno* in response to several controversial articles about the 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 have also stumbled upon some inadvertent conclusions that ‘isn’t it all the same as back then?’ articulated by several respected people with unpleasant personal experiences with the State Security. The individuals 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:

- the creation of blacklists
- emphasis on loyalty
- use of the ‘anti-church’ label
- references to intervention from higher levels
- defamation of potential martyrs.

The church authorities have a thorough knowledge of the activities of priests and engaged believers; they can monitor their media activities, their presence at various events and other opinionated content which 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 over 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.

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

This is closely related to the requirement of loyalty. Loyalty to bishops equals loyalty to the church, an argument which is specifically efficient in traditional Catholic communities such as those 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 over, for example, his political views. Thus, 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 that of mistaking the church hierarchy for the church as a whole; as 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, 80-81).

Those with sufficient number of black points for their sins of disloyalty are given an anti-church label. That is exactly what happened to the Slovak dissident we have already mentioned above, one of the leading figures of the pre-November underground church, František Mikloško.¹⁶ From the onset of the ‘Bezák case’ in June 2012, Mikloško played a key role in unravelling the case and was the first to bring to light the report about the prepared removal of the Archbishop. He also continued to draw attention to the key causes of the removal including the alleged mishandling of funds leading all the way up to the Vatican. Slovak church officials make no effort to conceal the fact that Mikloško is a *persona non grata*. In my view, Mikloško must be going through a true *déjà vu* experience. In March 1988, he organised the famous Candle Demonstration which delivered a decisive blow to the Communist regime in Czechoslovakia.¹⁷ Back then, those in

¹⁶ František Mikloško was born in 1947. Before 1989 he worked as a mathematician at the Slovak Academy of Sciences, later as a shop-floor worker (from 1983). He was engaged in the so-called underground church. After the fall of Communism in November 1989, he became 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 from 1990 to 1992. In 2004 and 2008, he ran for the presidency of the Slovak Republic. In 2008 he left the Christian Democratic Movement (KDH) and co-founded a new party, Conservative Democrats of Slovakia.

¹⁷ The Candle Demonstration, also called the Bratislava Good Friday, was a peaceful demonstration of citizens for religious and civil rights and freedoms in the socialist Czechoslovakia. It took place on 1988 in Hviezdoslavovo Square in Bratislava. This event can be regarded as the climax of the activities of the underground church in Communist Czechoslovakia and the systemic beginning of the definitive fall of the Communist totalitarian regime in Slovakia which followed on 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 were seriously infringed.

power labelled him in the media as an anti-church element, whose acts were 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 the salaries of priests by 16 EUR. In reaction to this step, Filip Čierny, a Franciscan priest known for his media presence, released a video blog in which he criticised 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 too strong, and so he decided to send a letter directly to their superior in which he asked that the media activity of his brother Filip be prohibited. I myself have been confronted with a 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 my 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 the conclusion that the only addressee missing was the director of the planet...

Those with totalitarian power do not need martyrs, nor do they need crowds that follow them. Therefore, as concluded by Cyril Vasil', they attempt to accuse their enemies of so-termed 'normal', non-ideological crimes (Vasil' 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 instead of treason, espionage, organising a revolt, or, as one of the most popular accusations, of 'impeding state control over the Church'. Any pretext for adding anti-Semitism, Aryanization or sabotage was used in order to increase the penalty. And that is exactly what we see in modern-day Slovakia. Those who do not 'toe the line' often face accusations from higher levels, some of which are truly verging on the limits of common sense. The story of R. Bezák, mentioned many times in this text, serves once again as a good example. Indeed, the notorious 'Eleven Questions'¹⁸, sent

¹⁸ The so-called 'Eleven Questions' are part of the correspondence between Archbishop Bezák and the Vatican Congregation for Bishops, which took place after the visit of the Trnava archdiocese at the beginning of 2012. After publishing the document, many journalists find pleasure in pointing to questions about wearing

to R. Bezák by the Vatican Congregation for Clergy have added a tragicomic twist to this case.

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

CONCLUSIONS

I have attempted to analyse the Church–media relationship based on my insights into both what annoys and what is welcomed by both of the parties. I have enumerated several potential causes and consequences of this phenomenon. Based on the above one may infer that both parties face the following challenges: 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, and by depth I mean the willingness to put extra effort into discovering the value of a phenomenon or an event which does not *prima facie* seem to carry any *news value*. By understanding I mean here an acceptance of the rules of the craft of journalism, accommodating these rules and having the courage to be open and ‘normal’. As psychologists used to say, this is the hardest thing to do...

In this respect a new question arises: Is faith a prerequisite for a correct interpretation of church events? Does a journalist need to be a believer in order to process a religious message correctly 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 have been dealt with in my previous works in which I concluded that an established empathy with the church gives the journalist a head start for a successful transmission of a religious message (Rončáková 2010, 196). However, this conclusion can be argued against and so it would be of interest to explore the question in more detail.

jeans, taking showers 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>.