

2019 Cardinal Foley Lecture on the Church and Social Communications From Anger to Renewal: Communications and the Crisis in the Church

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Introduction

Thank you so much for that kind introduction, Father Dailey, and thank you, Bishop Senior, for welcoming me here to St. Charles Borromeo Seminary. I can't tell you how honored and humbled I am to be asked to deliver the 2019 John Cardinal Foley Lecture on the Church and Social Communications.

I never had the privilege of knowing Cardinal Foley, but he's a legend in Catholic communications. By all accounts he lived "the Joy of the Gospel" long before that phrase became the blueprint for a papacy. His many years as the head of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications put him at the forefront of the Church's efforts to engage with the world, and were dedicated to far-seeing efforts to promote effective communications through the Church's extensive global network of institutions large and small.

As much as I admire Cardinal Foley's work in Rome, I have a special place in my heart for his earlier work here in Philadelphia – as a priest; as a teacher at Cardinal Dougherty High School (as it happens, just a few years after my father graduated); and as the long-time editor of *The Catholic Standard & Times*. My favorite story about that period of Cardinal Foley's life comes from the New York Times, which [reported that](#)

During a trip to Egypt in 1975, [Father Foley's boss, Philadelphia's Cardinal Krol] asked [Foley] whether he should take a camel ride. A cautious Father Foley said no, but Cardinal Krol ignored the advice. As his eminence, wearing an Arab head scarf, struggled not to fall off the camel, Father Foley snapped a picture. When the photo appeared in newspapers, Cardinal Krol asked him why he had taken the photo after telling him not to ride the beast. "As your priest, I gave you my best advice," he replied. "As a journalist, I took your picture."

Cardinal Foley was well-known for his funny stories, but of course behind the twinkle in his eye he took his work with utmost seriousness, [telling](#) Catholic journalists that they had a "sacred" calling to "bring people to truth and to love, in a

society that needs both.”

It’s hard to think of a subject more serious, and more in need of greater truth and authentic love, than the one we’re here to discuss tonight: the clerical sexual abuse crisis, a source of anger and anguish among American Catholics for decades now, and a source of rekindled and intensified anger and anguish this past year. From a communications perspective, it’s hard to think of anything more challenging than shaping a response to this crisis in a way that helps move us forward together from anger and anguish towards justice, reform, renewal, and with God’s grace, healing.

Over these past months many have been tempted to stay angry, and with good reason. Every week another shoe seems to drop: we hear of another person – a flesh-and-blood person, someone’s son, someone’s brother, someone’s friend – who has suffered abuse at the hands of a priest. We hear another story of cover-up or malfeasance or failure of leadership on the part of a bishop. We hear more talk from everyone, but see little action from anyone.

All of this has led to what Pope Francis [calls](#) a “crisis of credibility.” As he says in his [letter to the U.S. bishops](#),

The Church's credibility has been seriously undercut and diminished by these sins and crimes, but even more by the efforts made to deny or conceal them. This has led to a growing sense of uncertainty, distrust and vulnerability among the faithful. As we know, the mentality that would cover things up, far from helping to resolve conflicts, enabled them to fester and cause even greater harm to the network of relationships that today we are called to heal and restore.

And yet we know that we can’t let our anger overwhelm or paralyze us. As Catholics we’re called to live our Gospel mission, to love God and our neighbor, to witness to the cross and the empty tomb, in the particular moment that we’re given – this particular moment – as sobering and challenging as that is. To move forward from anger to justice and healing and hope.

So how do we do that? How do we direct our anger and anguish towards reform and renewal? What changes of heart and mind and culture, and what concrete steps, are needed to begin to rebuild credibility and trust in the Church?

And once we've thought through those steps toward renewal, how do we effectively convey them, both to our fellow Catholics and to non-Catholics, so as to begin to regain our credibility as a Church, both internally and in our public witness? How can effective communication help us move forward together?

I ask these questions in that particular order, because in answering them, it's important to remember a basic communications principle: substance drives communications, not the other way around. The clerical abuse crisis faced by the Church does not spring from poor public relations strategies or a failure of "messaging," and it won't be resolved by slick websites, clever media strategies, or just the right turn of phrase. The crisis is rooted in grave substantive failures that require serious substantive responses. Church leaders have hurt real people, and real reform is necessary. Determining what those responses should be necessarily precedes any talk of what communication about this crisis should look like. As Pope Francis [says](#), this is not about "marketing or strategizing" but about "the beating heart of the Gospel."

So tonight I'll focus on those three issues, in that order:

- Our crisis of credibility, and how we can begin to address it;
- Substantive principles we should consider to begin to chart a path forward, both spiritually and practically; and
- Principles of effective communications in this current moment.

Crisis of credibility

First, let's briefly review the long road that brought us to the crisis of credibility engendered by the most recent wave of revelations regarding clerical sexual abuse, and some hard numbers regarding what that crisis looks like. I had the opportunity to outline this tragic story at a recent gathering in Chicago, where I spoke about [the four waves of the crisis](#).

The clerical abuse crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States came to broad public attention in the 1980s, and drew scattered diocesan responses. It reemerged in the 1990s, with the U.S. bishops as well as the Vatican developing more robust anti-abuse policies; and it surged into the public eye again in 2002 with the *Boston Globe's* Spotlight series on abuse and cover-up in the Archdiocese of Boston.

In response, at their June 2002 meeting in Dallas, the U.S. bishops adopted the Charter for the Protection of Children and Young People, often known as the Dallas Charter. It required U.S. dioceses to:

- Promote healing and reconciliation of victim-survivors and their families;
- Respond promptly and effectively to abuse allegations;
- Cooperate with civil authorities;
- Discipline offenders;
- Create a safe environment for children and young people through training and screening; and
- Provide means of accountability for priests for the future, and ensure the problem continued to be effectively dealt with through the Secretariat of Child and Youth Protection and the National Review Board ([Archdiocese of Chicago](#)).

It did not, however, have an effective mechanism for holding bishops themselves accountable.

That failure was central to the latest wave of the abuse crisis this past year. You all don't need me to rehearse the details: the revelations about former Cardinal McCarrick; the release of the bombshell Pennsylvania grand jury report; a series of tendentious, agenda-driven letters from Archbishop Vigano; the acceptance of Washington D.C. Cardinal Wuerl's resignation; a November meeting of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops which succeeded in conveying mostly disunity and ineffectiveness; and further shoes dropping, as noted earlier, seemingly every week.

While some see this as an American problem, this latest wave has demonstrated that this is a global crisis that requires a global response. Australia, Canada, Chile, Germany, India, Mexico, Ireland, and France are just some of many in a tragic litany of countries whose Catholic lay faithful have suffered through the devastating reality of clerical sexual abuse and cover-up. In country after country, these lay Catholics insist on effective safeguarding measures to protect those who are young and vulnerable, and seek to hold bishops accountable for the attitudes, actions, and inaction which allowed the sexual abuse of children and vulnerable adults to occur as prelates sought to protect the institution rather than the faithful.

This has resulted in the crisis of credibility and weakened moral authority that I spoke of earlier. A January 2019 [Gallup poll](#) found that “a record-low 31% of U.S. Catholics rate the honesty and ethical standards of the clergy” highly. This is an as-

tounding 18 percentage point drop between 2017 and 2018. Similarly, Catholics confidence in the Church dropped from 52% in June 2017 to 44% in June 2018. This comes after steep declines in trust in the aftermath of earlier waves of the crisis.

These numbers are remarkable. The fact that U.S. Catholic's views of their clergy and the institutional Church could fall so far so fast tells you that earlier expressions of higher confidence had shallow roots.

Spiritual and Moral Principles Grounding a Path Forward

Before we grapple with the concrete steps needed to move us forward from this crisis of credibility, we should reflect on how to strengthen those shallow roots. One place to start is [Pope Francis' recent letter to the US bishops](#), which looks to the spiritual underpinnings that any successful renewal effort will need.

Grounded in core themes of his pontificate, the letter is a sobering look at the disastrous effects of what Pope Francis calls the “sins and crimes” at the root of the crisis. The Holy Father lays out essential spiritual elements of a path forward, above all “missionary and pastoral conversion.” For Pope Francis, “combatting the culture of abuse, the loss of credibility, the resulting bewilderment and confusion, and the discrediting of our mission urgently demands of us a renewed and decisive approach....” The bishops are “called to heal and restore” precisely because

God's faithful people and the Church's mission continue to suffer greatly as a result of abuses of power and conscience and sexual abuse, and the poor way that they were handled, as well as the pain of seeing an episcopate lacking in unity....

To Pope Francis, renewal won't be achieved through “stern decrees or by simply creating new committees or improving flow charts, as if we were in charge of a department of human resources”; this reduces mission to “a mere administrative or organizational function in the ‘evangelization business.’”

Healing will instead come through a “clear and decisive focus” on our Gospel mission. Unity is key to that mission, for “the Lord was well aware that, at the hour of the cross, lack of unity, division and dispersion... would be the greatest temptations faced by his disciples — attitudes that would distort and hinder their mission.” Credibility “will be the fruit of a united body that, while acknowledging

its sinfulness and limitations, is at the same time capable of preaching the need for conversion.”

Most of all, service to the least of these is key to our mission, for "credibility is born of trust, and trust is born of sincere, daily, humble and generous service to all, but especially to those dearest to the Lord's heart.”

In fact, other traditional principles of Catholic social teaching also provide guidelines for a faithful and effective response. Our faith calls us to defend human life and human dignity, including that of victim-survivors. Catholic teaching requires us to respect human rights and accept responsibility. And we need to practice both solidarity and subsidiarity in responding to these institutional failures.

Pope Francis focuses on such solidarity when he says to the U.S. bishops that to live our Gospel mission, we must remember the relational dimensions of our communion of faith: “The catholicity of the Church cannot be reduced merely to a question of doctrine or law; rather, it reminds us that we are not solitary pilgrims; “If one member suffers, all suffer together.”

These principles – a commitment to mission, to unity, to human dignity, to service, and above all a recognition that we're all in this together – should root our prayer, our practical response, and our communication about the clerical abuse crisis.

Practical Principles Grounding a Path Forward

Building on these spiritual and moral foundations, what practical principles should ground our concrete response to broken trust and this crisis of credibility, as well as our communications efforts in support of that response?

To answer that question, it's helpful to look through the lens of the upcoming global Meeting on the Protection of Minors in the Church scheduled to take place at the Vatican from February 21-24 and involve the heads of the world's episcopal conferences as well as certain other Church leaders with similar roles.

Expectations for this meeting have ranged from unreasonably high to unreasonably low. Both Fr. Tom Reese at the [National Catholic Reporter](#) and Fr. Raymond de Souza at the [Catholic Herald](#), in perhaps the first instance of them ever agreeing on anything, wrote articles saying the meeting was doomed to failure.

I'm somewhat more hopeful. The organizing committee has an impressive roster,

including Father Hans Zollner, the president of the Centre for Child Protection in Rome and one of the church's leading experts on safeguarding minors; Archbishop Charles Scicluna of Malta, the Holy Father's point man on the clerical abuse crisis, recently appointed adjunct secretary for the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, and a canon lawyer who has been called [the "Elliot Ness of the Vatican"](#) for his success at investigating complex matters under Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis; Cardinal Oswald Gracias of Bombay; and Cardinal Blase Cupich of Chicago. Two lay women, Dr. Linda Ghisoni and Dr. Gabriela Gambino, both undersecretaries for the Dicastery of Laity, Family and Life, mothers, and canon lawyers, are advising the committee.

From the outset, the committee has [indicated](#) that they want to ensure "that victim survivors of clerical abuse are first and foremost in the minds of all at the February gathering." All participants were asked to meet with victim survivors beforehand, and victim survivors will offer their testimonies at the meeting. Just today on the papal plane, Pope Francis [reaffirmed](#) that there will be victim testimonies at the meeting, and that he wants bishops to "become aware of the tragedy caused" when a child is abused.

They have also [made clear](#) that the Holy Father seeks to convey that "the abuse of minors is a global problem that requires a global response by the church. Those participating in the meeting will be called to take responsibility not just for their particular church and the clergy and religious under their care and supervision, but for the church as a whole."

Finally, they have [made clear](#) that "the meeting will focus on three main themes of responsibility, accountability, and transparency as participants work together to respond to this grave challenge."

These principles – keeping victim-survivors first; recognizing the global nature of the problem and the need for a global response; and focusing on the themes of responsibility, accountability, and transparency – should ground and guide our own development of practical steps towards a path forward here in the United States, as well as our communications efforts.

At the Initiative on Catholic Social Thought at Georgetown, we've organized several intense, distinctive gatherings on the moral, spiritual, and human costs of the clerical sexual abuse crisis, and have learned that in order to really understand the issues at stake, victims need to be a central part of the conversation. And if the world's episcopal conference presidents leave Rome in February recognizing that

the problem of clerical sexual abuse is not merely a Western problem, but a global one, and take responsibility for crafting an effective global response, that will be a major step forward.

Improvements regarding taking responsibility for developing a path forward, effective measures to hold bishops accountable, and increased transparency are necessary elements of a path forward, and I'll talk about them in turn.

While not all of us were part of causing this problem, we all need to work together to be a part of the solution. Responsibility for charting a path forward rests with bishops and with laypeople together. As Bishop Shawn McKnight of the Diocese of Jefferson City [puts it](#),

Whether we are individually guilty or not for the clergy sex abuse crisis plaguing our Church, we all share responsibility for getting it fixed. We are all in this together, and every bishop, including the Bishop of Rome, must face this moral catastrophe with their people and not separate from them. In matters as grave as sexual abuse, I know I should not make decisions alone or with a small group of clergy advisors. I want to work together with you, all the people of the Diocese, so that we can better preserve the communion of the Church with the Lord and each other.

Given the loss of credibility of the institutional Church, laypeople have a particular responsibility to step up within the bounds of our canonical roles. This is no time for passivity. Groups like the [Leadership Roundtable](#) and others who are bringing the expertise of laypeople to the table as resources for the institutional Church should be applauded for doing the hard work of coming up with faithful, responsible, practical roadmaps forward. This is also an important theme of our Initiative at Georgetown.

At the same time, bishops need to own responsibility as well. As [others](#) have argued, the current clerical sexual abuse crisis is also a crisis of leadership. To demonstrate real leadership, bishops need to demonstrate through their words and actions that they understand the harm that has been done, the trust that has been lost, and the changes that are needed; that they're committed to the hard work of making those changes, and of challenging their brother bishops to do the same; and that they're committed to working with laity in this crucial effort.

Regarding episcopal accountability, several proposals are circulating, with much discussion taking place around best practices and plans to hold bishops accountable without requiring a change in current Church law. While those plans coalesce, some bishops, like [Archbishop Lori](#) of Baltimore, have taken the initiative to come up with independent systems to report allegations of abuse or misconduct by a bishop serving in their dioceses. These efforts should be applauded.

But real accountability for bishops will only take hold when we take steps to end the culture of clericalism that has too often led clerics to cover up grave moral failures. Clericalism simply has no place in the Church. As Bishop McKnight has [said](#),

“With our growing awareness of the abuse of power manifested in the sexual abuse crisis, we are experiencing the pangs of dying to a false way of exercising ecclesial leadership in our Church. Authentic, genuine communion never requires clericalism in order to be preserved. In fact, clericalism only leads to greater division.”

Finally, transparency has particular importance for our conversation here today regarding communications about the clerical abuse crisis. For justice to occur, renewal to take place, and the laity to regain confidence in the institutional Church, we need honesty and candor from our bishops. A lack of transparency can be just another manifestation of clericalism. As journalist Russell Shaw, the former Director of Communications for the U.S bishops’ conference, puts it, “honesty and openness are necessary if the exercise of authority is not to degenerate into paternalistic authoritarianism with a smiling, ‘pastoral’ face.”

In Shaw’s book [Nothing to Hide: Secrecy, Communication, and Communion in the Church](#), he notes that secrecy makes accountability “all but impossible,” and that while “Americans take it for granted that, just as much as possible, public business affecting everyone should be carried on publicly....even in this day and age these principles are not clearly established and accepted in the Church.” Shaw is right to say that

openness and candor would not have prevented the scandal, ...they would have made it a lot less traumatic than it turned out to be. We need to give openness and honesty a try lest something equally as bad, or even worse, should occur in the future. And also because, I

am convinced, an honest, open church is the kind of church God wants the Catholic Church to be.

The media has a valuable role to play here as well. No discussion of the clerical abuse crisis should take place without noting that it has been the hard work of responsible, professional journalists, both Catholic and secular, that has brought clerical sexual abuse and its cover-up to light. Too often we heard information from the media that we should have heard directly from our bishops and others. The media do us a great service when they cover this issue responsibly and thoroughly, and we owe such journalists a debt of gratitude.

Principles of Effective Communication

I said at the outset that substance drives communications. You can't have effective communications without something real to communicate. Repackaging past efforts in new language won't work. There is no magic wand that communications teams can use to make things better without substantive steps towards genuine accountability, transparency, reform, and renewal.

But once we can come together around substantive spiritual and practical principles to root our response, and concrete steps to put them into action, it's fair to ask how effective communication can help us move forward together.

The first step in effective communication is to understand the environment you're operating in. Unless the only phone you own has a cord and hangs on the wall in your kitchen, and unless you still have to get up off the couch to turn a dial to change the channel on your television, I don't have to tell you that our current media environment – particularly our social media environment – is hostile, and divisive, and tribal, and toxic. It amplifies crises, erodes trust, and undermines authority. It's so overwhelming, omnipresent, and addictive that any efforts we make to advance views about our faith or our Church often amount to little more than whispering in a hurricane – at best.

What's the right posture in that sort of environment? Retreat and go back to that rotary phone? Talk only to that small subset of people who share your uncharitable belief that most of your coreligionists are heretics? Decide that if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, and do your best to make Catholic Twitter even more snarky than it already is?

I think the better approach comes from St. Francis de Sales, the patron saint of

journalists: “Be who you are and be that well.” We should act as we’re called to act by our Catholic faith. This is particularly true with our efforts regarding issues concerning clerical sexual abuse. For instance:

- We should always hold the weakest and most vulnerable close, and work together with them where possible. When it comes to the abuse crisis, that means that victim-survivors should be heard and kept at the center of any response.
 - A corollary: we should avoid diminishing or distracting from the suffering of survivors and the real evils perpetrated by clerics through an approach that is defensive, unwilling to acknowledge failures, or seeks to point out the failures of others.
- Our approach should be rooted in humility, sorrow, and repentance.
- Honesty and truthfulness should be our starting point.
- Episcopal communications should be pastoral and aimed at fostering communion. Bishops are not risk managers or defense attorneys, but leaders and pastors of the Church of Jesus Christ.
- We should all see our efforts as vocations, not just jobs. We should strive for excellence, which means that if we’re communicators, our work should be positive, proactive, consistent, coordinated, useful, and action-oriented.
- We should offer a counter-witness by resisting division and polarization, especially on this grave issue. Unfortunately, some try to use this horrific crisis to advance narrow ideological or ecclesial agendas, further hurting victim-survivors and the Body of Christ. We are at an historical moment when many have suffered from the actions and inaction of our Church’s leaders. It’s time to remember that we’re all in this together, and to get where we’re going we need to row in the same direction.
 - Just last week at World Youth Day in Panama, in his speech to Central America’s bishops, Pope Francis [reminded](#) us of the importance of a “compassionate heart”, noting that “even in Catholic media, compassion is not there. There is the schism, condemnation, appraisal of oneself, denunciation of the heresy ... Compassion cannot be lost in our Church nor can the centrality of compassion be lost for the bishops.”

- Finally, as we try to work together across divisions to achieve a path forward on this very difficult set of issues, we should show mercy toward each other. Pope Francis has [said](#) that we see the Church’s “credibility...in how she shows merciful and compassionate love.” If our project is to rebuild our Church’s credibility, we need to show others that we live God’s call to mercy.

Conclusion

These are just a few principles to guide effective communications in this current moment. It’s a moment marked by the serious crisis of credibility faced by the Church in the wake of the clerical sexual abuse crisis. Any approach to rebuilding that credibility must be rooted in core principles of our Catholic faith. Once again, this is not about “[marketing or strategizing](#)” but about “the beating heart of the Gospel.”

These Gospel principles – a renewed call to holiness and commitment to mission through unity, a respect for human dignity, and service to the least of these – should root our prayer, our concrete response, and our communication about the clerical sexual abuse crisis. Above all, we should remember that though many, we’re called to stand together as one; “we are not [solitary pilgrims](#), for ‘If one member suffers, all suffer together.’”