

INSIGHTS AND ANSWERS ON MEDIA BIAS

USCC Committee for Communications

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Diocesan communication offices often face the issue of bias against the Church, whether in the news or in the entertainment media. Here is a practical response to this issue.

The Problem

The intentional effort to slant content in a way that conforms to a prejudice against a person or a group—in this case, the Catholic Church—is referred to here as **media bias**. It involves actual bigotry that is often an expression of a person’s background and upbringing, even if these factors are no longer the conscious causes.

Giving a false or misleading impression arising from factors other than personal prejudice is referred to here as **media distortion**. With regard to the Catholic Church, distortion may be grounded in such factors as ignorance of and inexperience with the Church, dependence on sources with hidden biases, lack of professional standards, and reliance on widespread cultural attitudes (which in the United States include a long history of suspicion toward Catholicism). A secular society with few sacred symbols of its own also finds it hard to grasp the sensitivity of believers for the sacred symbols of their own faith.

Disagreement with the Church’s positions on public issues, coverage of **division** within the Church, or coverage of **misconduct** on the part of clergy or other church leaders may or may not be signs of distortion or bias. When fellow Catholics are the source of criticism, it can make it more difficult to sort out the presence of bias or distortion.

Religious bias is a serious matter, and accusations should not be made lightly or with insufficient evidence. In the case of Catholicism, evidence can take the form of a pattern of showing disrespect for Catholic persons or symbols, a single instance of especially vicious mockery or scorn, a display of attitudes and use of language that echo historically anti-Catholic points of view (such as references to the pope or bishops attempting to impose Catholic beliefs on all Americans), a habitual carelessness in representing the Church’s positions, or a rote repetition of contemporary or past “failures and defects” of the Church or its leadership.

The Answers

Where **media bias**, indicating actual bigotry, is present, the answer is an appeal using Catholic

and secular means of communication to the good will of the general public to recognize and to reject the existence of religious prejudice in their midst. This good will is effectively activated by marshaling the kinds of evidence of bias referred to above. Charges of bigotry based on secondhand information or on the kind of abrasiveness to which many groups in contemporary society feel subjected by the media may be unfair and not sustainable as proof of bias. Unsubstantiated charges can diminish the effectiveness of complaints against authentic instances of bias.

Groups not formally affiliated with the Church can be of help in dealing with media bias. They, in turn, should respect the local bishop's view of how best to deal with these situations.

As for media distortion, in which personal prejudice is not a factor, several things can be done, many of which are preventive in nature. Diocesan communication offices can:

1. Provide the media with stories showing the Church fulfilling her mission and serving the community. Such contacts should be habitual, not stopping even if only a few stories see the light of day. Leverage the times of the year or the events that naturally draw the media's attention to religion to offer these kind of stories.
2. Create a web site—updated daily or at least weekly—to give information on Church events, positions, and breaking news. Have comprehensive fax and e-mail systems to contact media. Make sure the media have someone to contact twenty-four hours a day.
3. Media personnel continually change, so keep alert to new people arriving to welcome them and offer help with Catholic issues.
4. Provide for formal and informal meetings of bishops and other church leaders with media leaders. Use **World Communications Day** as one opportunity.
5. Don't hesitate to call reporters, editors, and news directors regularly to let them know privately and informally how you think the Church is being covered. Long-term, this is preferable to the occasional public outburst.
6. Offer media outlets a "Catholic library," including such items as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, *Catholic Almanac*, *CNS Stylebook on Religion*, and local diocesan newspapers and directories. Check regularly that the library is still in place.
7. The media often rely on the "usual suspects" who voice extreme and mutually exclusive points of view. Using local resources—seminaries, colleges, and universities—identify people who can speak effectively and expertly for the Church. Persuade them to be on a list for media referrals. Offer training.
8. Develop print and video clipping files that can provide the evidence of how the Church, over time, is being covered. Log the number and content of complaining calls received from Catholics, who are also the media's clients.

9. With serious cases of distortion, gather the facts showing how the Church was misrepresented or the comments of its spokespeople minimized. Disputes over taste or opinion rarely get far. However, evidence of unfair treatment, especially involving factually wrong information, enables you to appeal to issues of credibility and the ethics by which editors, publishers, and standards and practices personnel say they operate. The contacts gained in the activities described in #3-5 can provide not only access but also engender a sense of mutual trust in critical situations.
10. Be consoled by the last beatitude: "Blessed are you when they insult you and persecute you and utter every kind of slander against you because of me. Be glad and rejoice, for your reward will be great in heaven" (Mt 5.11-12a).

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