

DRAFT

SOCIAL VALUES AND PUBLIC DISCOURSE: COMMUNICATION AND CHRISTIAN IDENTITY OF EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS IN A NEW CULTURAL CONTEXT

SUMMARY

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One characteristic of recent years has been the consolidation of a new cultural and legal context in which certain values, considered to be fundamental by the Catholic Church, are now being challenged by large portions of society. These changes impact especially educational institutions with a Christian identity. The novelty can be summarized with one question: how can one contribute to the common good when proposals offered by the Catholic Church are questioned –or directly refused– to be a social good?

Faced with this question, two particular challenges ought to be considered:

- 1) In what way can Christian values be communicated and presented so as to highlight their profound positive sense, their potential to inspire joint collaboration in pursuit of the common good, and their core characteristic, that of respect for every human being and for the world we live in?
- 2) In potentially hostile communicational situations, how should questions or controversial ideas be confronted so as to safeguard the positive side of an institutional proposal from the possibility of being overshadowed by a poorly expressed or poorly assimilated element of a presentation that might generate a bitter aftertaste of intolerance, leading way to unhelpful disagreements, or even

to damaging scandals?

The purpose of this paper is to analyze these questions, using as a starting point the specific reality of educational institutions of Christian inspiration that seek to communicate their core values in today's world.

1) New legal and communication context

In recent years, Latin America has been undergoing a complex process of social change, demonstrated in many new legislation cases dealing with issues at the core of the identity of educational and healthcare organizations –such as hospitals, dining facilities, health centers– of Catholic inspiration.

For example, in Mexico City (April 2007) and Uruguay (October 2012) abortion was legalized; since May 2012, Argentine legislation allows for the discontinuation of nutrition of terminally ill patients, and a law passed in June 2013 makes financing of in-vitro fertilization, which includes selection, storage and disposal of embryos, mandatory.

Argentina (2010), Brazil (2013) and Uruguay (2013) have legalized same sex marriage. Similar laws are being debated in other parliaments within the region. Moreover, in many cases, official education programs require schools to include content that collides with Christian values. This scenario gives rise to new questions and challenges for Catholic institutions, which must now work in a plural space, in which their own identity, public opinion, and legislation coexist in tense equilibrium.

This new legal framework has arisen simultaneously with a new communicational environment that heavily impacts public debates on values: in few years, as a result of the proliferation of social networks and smartphones, enunciations, enouncements, social situations of enunciation and the ability to record the statements have grown.

Today it is much easier to introduce a speech in the public arena, given that it is no longer necessary to meet the criteria of newspaper editors or television producers, otherwise known as *gatekeepers*. Anyone can record a private or semi-public situation and expose it in a context of global consumption. What happens in a classroom or a conversation on a bus can become a national *trending topic* in three hours and be seen on the news that very night¹.

The potential of the digital world has made statement making more democratic, but at the same time, it has diminished, if not eliminated, the spaces of intimacy and privacy. This new technological and communicative context generates opportunities and risks.

2) Some consequences

¹ A very good example of this new visibility era related to an educational institution is the "Emilio Cuartero" case, the "Barrendero Bob Esponja". Available in <http://www.rtve.es/noticias/20120608/barrendero-canta-bob-esponja-ninos-increible-ver-caras-volvere/534058.shtml>.

Environmental change is a reality with objective consequences. Psychology, communication theory, and sociology have shown that, on the one hand, people usually have a tendency to embrace opinions that are perceived to be held by the majority, and on the other hand that, they find it difficult to express their own position when they realize that most others think otherwise. Elizabeth Noelle-Neumann referred to this mechanism as *spiral of silence*. Alexis de Tocqueville refers to it as the *tyranny of the majority*, and René Girard, as *mimetic contagion*.

The sensation of unanimity has a strong objective value: anyone who opposes growing opinion will suffer aggressive resistance. When others are perceived as "everyone but me" or when a point of view spreads rapidly, it is difficult to escape from mimetic contagion. Furthermore, in the legal space, law bears in it an educational function, by which what is legal is perceived as good: changes in legislation consolidate social values, often going beyond what is strictly indicated by the law .

In practice, this means that when a social agent makes a statement in opposition to the opinion of the majority, the other agents of the public forum will receive credit for criticizing him, and they will feel driven, if not forced, to do so. If a soccer fan or an official, publicly criticizes a player for being African-American, all politicians and opinion leaders will feel urged to give negative public judgments about those who discriminate and, if appropriate, to promote sanctions.

The case in which an opinion accepted by the majority collides with core values that permeate Christian culture is more complex: although those Christian values sometimes may pertain to a minority, its promoters believe that these values dignify the person and, even though they might be unpopular, the Christian culture considers them as "non-negotiable principles", given that rejection or betrayal of these basic principles is always, in their point of view, an action inherently contrary to the common good.

Cultural and social change establishes a new approach to public perception of behavior and statements. Specifically, when it comes to certain Christian values, as Luciano Elizalde² finds, what once led to a judgment of discredit now gives rise to potential scandal. In his opinion, judgment of discredit is seen when a certain public statement produces a lowering in the reputation of the communicator, but without questioning his legitimacy in expressing that value, or his social position. The outcome can be summarized as follows: "although the value you propose seems outdated and narrow minded and we therefore do not consider your thoughts to be interesting or positive, we nevertheless recognize your right to think and express your opinion".

On the other hand, scandal –a negative emotional outburst– arises when a core value of the community is violated: "your thinking or behavior is an attack against the sustainability of our community, and therefore you have no right to express that

² Cf. Luciano Elizalde et. al., *La gestión del disenso*, La Crujía, Buenos Aires, 2011, pp. 45-104.

opinion, you are harmful to us, you should be punished or excluded". Given that fundamental community values have become distant from Catholic values, the possibility of activating a scandal has grown, and the legitimacy of the Church as a promoter of positive lifestyles for society at large is questioned by important sectors of society.

This affects educational institutions in particular because they function with the objective of promoting social values, and under normal circumstances they should be included in a formal system, regulated –and even funded at times– by the State.

3) Legal and social tensions

It is known that in Latin America contrasts reign: it has the largest Catholic population in the world and the Church has been, and still is, a social agent with capital relevance for all the countries in the region. Gospel values are the inspiration for numerous educational, charitable, and service-providing institutions. For instance, in Latin America there are 1,669 Catholic hospitals and many more of Christian inspiration even they do not officially depend on the Catholic Church. Nevertheless, there are many Catholics whose social values are in disagreement with teachings of the magisterium³.

In this new context, a question arises: are Catholic or Catholic-inspired organizations entitled to organize themselves according to their principles and to promote their values in the social space? In concrete terms: can a Catholic school teach that it is in disagreement with legislation that approves same sex marriage? Can Catholic hospitals, such as Mater Dei Clinic in Buenos Aires, refuse to perform sterilization, exclusively carried out for contraceptive purposes, by appealing to its identity and values, without being sanctioned by authorities?

Difficulties may arise when it comes to a school's ideals, for instance, the relationship with a teacher who no longer shares institutional principles or criteria laid out in an employment contract. This problem is not limited only to Latin America. For several years already, in Spain there has been a controversy with regards to determining the suitability of religion teachers in recruitment phase, particularly in cases in which the State covers the salary of that teacher⁴.

In the U.S. there are 39 family businesses that have initiated lawsuits with the federal government so as to avoid penalties for refusing to finance health services which include practices that go against their principles, and there are 35 pending lawsuits presented by dioceses and institutions of religious inspiration. These actions give rise to new demands and accusations, as Kelli Garcia of the National Women's Law Center claims: "When hospitals and drugstores refuse to give women reproductive attention

³ Further information available at

<http://www.sft.org.ar/2009/ARGENTINA%202008%20Primer%20encuesta%20nacional%20creencias%20y%20actitudes%20religiosas.pdf>.

⁴ Further information available in "La sentencia del Constitucional sobre los acuerdos España-Vaticano enciende la polémica", *Diario El País*, 24-II-2007; http://elpais.com/diario/2007/02/24/sociedad/1172271602_850215.html.

invoking their religious beliefs, they are using their religion to discriminate and to do harm to others”⁵.

Also, some propose the opinion that “There is no need to be tolerant to the intolerant”, as was stated in the *European Framework National Statute for the Promotion of Tolerance*⁶, a document that is under discussion in the European Parliament, which deals with the question of what instance of power may establish restrictions and criteria for trials.

Beyond the Catholic world, it is well known that Jehovah’s Witnesses’ have had their fair share of tensions with the law because of their principles, by which they are prohibited from using weapons (conflict with military draft), swearing honor to the flag, receiving blood infusions (a particularly complicated case when it comes to minors and the right of parents to educate their children in their own convictions). Finally, so as to cut short the casuistry, one might recall the conflict in 1973 between an Amish community and the government of Wisconsin, with regards to compulsory primary education.

4) New consensus, new questions

This debate touches the roots of our society and our culture: are Catholics helpful or harmful to society? Do promoting Christian values improve the world or discriminate and harm others? Are Christian values compatible with a 21st century plural and democratic society?

Benedict XVI offers his own diagnosis: “Whereas in the past it was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, because of a profound crisis of faith that has affected many people”⁷.

This new situation presents a redistribution of what is considered to be socially legitimate, of new agreements and disagreements that shape the communicative context in which Catholic educational centers are immersed⁸. Therefore, the need arises to understand a “series of questions arising from a changed mentality”⁹ and to reshape methods of communication for institutional ideals in the public discourse. Entering into a narrower framework, more effort must be made in self-explanation, because statements need to transmit also the communication context, usually poorly

⁵ *Acepresa.com*, “La confusa identidad católica de la Universidad de Georgetown”, 7-XI-2013; <http://www.acepresa.com/articles/la-confusa-identidad-catolica-de-la-universidad-de-georgetown/>.

⁶ *European Framework National Statute for the Promotion of Tolerance*, Article 4; http://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2009_2014/documents/libe/dv/11_revframework_statute_/11_revframework_statute_en.pdf.

⁷ Benedict XVI, *Motu proprio Porta fidei*, 11-X-2011, n. 2.

⁸ More details on “defining situation of interaction” can be found in Erving Goffman, *The presentation of self in everyday life* (1959), especially in the introduction.

⁹ Benedict XVI, *Motu proprio Porta fidei*, 11-X-2011, n. 12.

known or not known at all.

Semiotics asserts that isolated propositions without context are meaningless.¹⁰ A phrase has meaning, but its sense is only activated in the context of its utterance. Irony helps illustrate this idea: "You look really nice with that new hairstyle!", said with a particular intonation and in a given context might actually produce a message opposite to its literal meaning. The use of irony makes for meaning A to be decoded as -A.

For historical and social reasons, in broad sectors of public opinion, the idea that the Church is intolerant and perhaps even discriminating is widely accepted. This dark cloud that floats over Catholicism –perhaps the result of rationalism's widespread influence in Europe– is part of a new cultural matrix and is one of the elements of the framework from which the Church and institutions of Christian identity are questioned. This context creates a latent tension in public discourse that attributes negative relevance to those values that are perceived as countercultural: beginning and end of human life, marriage and family, sexuality and conjugal life, the right of parents to educate their children; and on a different level, women in the Church, priestly celibacy.

5) Risks and opportunities for educational institutions

Before this panorama, Catholic educational institutions face an identity crisis: to get in tune with the new culture and communicate positively to society, is it necessary to be more Christian or less Christian? In other words, is there no choice but to let go of values, compromise institutional beliefs, or water down the proposal? Or, on the other hand, is it possible to be consistent with their own identity? Pope Francis offers a clue when he describes Christian activity as a "field hospital", that is to say, in this new context (in the metaphor, the battle situation) a new response must be provided (the type of medical care characteristic of a "field hospital"): first attend the urgent, those in critical state, and then move on to the rest. In *Evangelii Gaudium* he says: "We see then that the task of evangelization operates within the limits of language and of circumstances. It constantly seeks to communicate more effectively the truth of the Gospel in a specific context, without renouncing the truth, the goodness and the light which it can bring whenever perfection is not possible"¹¹.

In previous ages, the existence of a shared context, a common framework of interpretation – what Benedict XVI called "unitary cultural matrix" –, the positive value of Christian teachings was plainly recognized and a public statement of values could be interpreted directly. If A was said, then A was understood.

However, given that social knowledge and societal expectations now include negative prejudices against communicators of Christian identity, these can even be considered

¹⁰ Explanation of the terms "sense", "meaning", "discourse" and "narrative can be found in Damián Fernández Pedemonte, *La violencia del relato*, La Crujía, Buenos Aires, 2001, especially "De la semántica a la pragmática", pp. 67-72 (in Spanish).

¹¹ Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 45.

as potential aggressors of peaceful coexistence. Thus, we now have two fundamental circumstances of enunciation: one in which the shared cultural framework promotes positive reception of the message; and another in which the absence of a shared framework threatens the proper reception of the message (since the speaker's frame is not understood)¹².

6) Frame, discourse, enunciator and situation

George Lakoff¹³, an American linguist, explains that in public discourse it is necessary to work with frames, and that the central proposal of a social message is its frame. Each individual issue and each specific discussion takes place in a context that determines the general standing of participants with regards to the subject and that conditions the possibilities for dialogue. Therefore, when speaking about an issue, it is necessary to ask if there is a shared framework, if you are accepting that of the other, or if you must propose your own. In our situation, using this context analysis as a starting point is the key to success, because, as Christianity has distanced itself from the shared values framework¹⁴, it is primarily its own frame that is in question, or in other words, its legitimacy and position as a speaker in the public square.

A main priority in the communication of Christian principles is to share that which is positive, to express values that aim at building a better society. This process contains various levels within the proposal. First, there is a general framework of values, and then a set of specific values. It is similar to that which in classical ethics is called *synderesis*, which is the basic moral sense –do good and avoid evil–; the cardinal virtues, which are the proper ends of the fundamental human potencies: prudence, justice, fortitude and temperance; and other virtues, which are specifications of the four cardinal ones¹⁵.

Furthermore, there are various agreement levels that correspond to the capacity of the message's recipients to assimilate certain values: in certain environments it is more difficult to understand Church social justice values; in others, those related to the care of unborn life; and, according to some recent surveys, the Church's position about divorce or contraception are not understood in many places.

¹² Francis adds in *Ídem*, n. 34: "In today's world of instant communication and occasionally biased media coverage, the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects. In this way certain issues which are part of the Church's moral teaching are taken out of the context which gives them their meaning".

¹³ Cf. George Lakoff, *Moral Politics: how liberals and conservatives think*, University of Chicago Press, 2002. *Don't think in an elephant*, Chelsea Green Publishing, Vermont, 2004, 144 pp.

¹⁴ About this issue, Francis said: "Nor can we overlook the fact that in recent decades there has been a breakdown in the way Catholics pass down the Christian faith to the young. It is undeniable that many people feel disillusioned and no longer identify with the Catholic tradition. Growing numbers of parents do not bring their children for baptism or teach them how to pray. There is also a certain exodus towards other faith communities. The causes of this breakdown include: a lack of opportunity for dialogue in families, the influence of the communications media, a relativistic subjectivism, unbridled consumerism which feeds the market, lack of pastoral care among the poor, the failure of our institutions to be welcoming, and our difficulty in restoring a mystical adherence to the faith in a pluralistic religious landscape" (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 70).

¹⁵ Cf. Ángel Rodríguez Luño, *Cultura política y conciencia cristiana*, Rialp, Madrid, 2007, chapter 1: "Experiencia moral y ética filosófica", pp. 15-34.

Taking these levels into consideration, a proactive communication strategy ought to recognize that the transmission of the general framework of values is its first goal, and that it is only when the first level is achieved, that the second can be taken on. In a situation of positive communication, such as a breakout session for parents in a school or a Papal audience, the first level is almost guaranteed and the second, third and subsequent levels follow with great simplicity. In this line, Pope Francis suggests: "each of us should find ways to communicate Jesus wherever we are"¹⁶, keeping in mind the "different existential situations"¹⁷.

Familiarization with this process does not imply that when controversial issues are addressed –in which somehow there is prejudice against the Church's positions–, being able to express oneself adequately is an easy task. This is due to not only the difficulties inherent in communication but also to the risks involved in the message's reception. One simply ought to recall the global controversy that was generated from the misinterpretation of Benedict XVI's words in Regensburg about Islam in order to recognize that this issue is of prime relevance¹⁸.

Even more challenges arise in other communication situations such as journalistic interviews or discourses open to the intervention of participants. Usually, the questions contain elements from various levels, both by the issues addressed as well as by its internal organization. If you respond to a relatively complex question, referring directly to the specific topic put forth, you might implicitly accept as valid the framework proposed by the interviewer. Recognizing these different levels helps to identify what the true question is, and only then it is possible to offer an answer to the underlying issue, at an appropriate level, according to the time available and the ability of recipients to interpret the message¹⁹.

Take, for example, the Pope's famous statement on homosexuality given on the airplane in route back to Rome from Rio de Janeiro. One can say that taking advantage of a question about the alleged homosexuality of a Vatican employee, in reality the journalists were actually asking about his own standpoint on the broader issue of homosexuals, i.e. his own framework of values. The Pope organized his response on two levels: first and foremost, with regards to the framework, which was synthesized by the media with the phrase "Who am I to judge?". In other words, the question

¹⁶ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 121.

¹⁷ *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 122.

¹⁸ It is interesting to consider that this controversy was generated because Benedict's message was given in a particular communicational context (the academic environment of a university) and was extrapolated, decontextualized to another situation of communication (the mediated interchanges of international public opinion), in which, logically, it was decoded in a very different way, that is, opposite to what Benedict intended. Further information can be found in "Santa Sede publica anotaciones de Benedicto XVI a su discurso en Ratisbona", *Aceprentsa.com*, 9-X-2006. In those days, Angela Merkel said: "Whoever criticized the Pope didn't understand the goal of his speech. It was an invitation to dialogue between religions and the Pope spoke in favor of dialogue".

¹⁹ "The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness" (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 34).

addressed to the Pope, in fact, was: Are you intolerant towards homosexuals? And his answer sought to communicate, "No, I respect all people"²⁰. When the statement's context does not allow for an adequate explanation of the proposed value, it is vital to understand the discussion's framework and to provide an answer on the same level (that of the interpretation's own frame), even though it may not be possible to make further comments on the issue at hand.

In this case, once the Pope laid down the general framework ("no one should marginalize, we must be brothers and sisters to one another"), he could then enter into the second level of the question: "The problem is in making a lobby of this tendency". In many interviews with the media and other public communication situations, it is only possible to answer in regards to the general framework, and doing it well is itself an important achievement, which labels the identity of the statement maker. "Communication consists precisely in making the implicit explicit by means of words and deeds"²¹, and Christian identity ought to be made explicit, first of all, as a framework for communication²².

The Catholic Voices²³ project recognized in this process an opportunity to foster understanding of Catholic proposals in the public forum: First, one must identify the underlying shared value within the criticism –this implies two levels, that of the criticism, and that of the value from which the criticism is made–, and from that shared value build a common base, which has as its starting point the recognition of the good intentions of the participants.

Often, in certain topics found in the social realm, *paradoxical communication*²⁴ takes shape: a proposal that contradicts Christian values in a framework that is based on a Christian value. The only way of avoiding the paradox is by correcting the foundation of the approach: failure to move beyond the frame makes it impossible to avoid the

²⁰ It is worthwhile to include the whole quote so as to compare the nuances between the literal sense and the comment's social reception: "Then, you spoke about the gay lobby. So much is written about the gay lobby. I still haven't found anyone with an identity card in the Vatican with "gay" on it. They say there are some there. I believe that when you are dealing with such a person, you must distinguish between the fact of a person being gay and the fact of someone forming a lobby, because not all lobbies are good. This one is not good. If someone is gay and is searching for the Lord and has good will, then who am I to judge him? The Catechism of the Catholic Church explains this in a beautiful way, saying ... wait a moment, how does it say it... it says: "no one should marginalize these people for this, they must be integrated into society". The problem is not having this tendency, no, we must be brothers and sisters to one another, and there is this one and there is that one. The problem is in making a lobby of this tendency: a lobby of misers, a lobby of politicians, a lobby of masons, so many lobbies. For me, this is the greater problem. Thank you so much for asking this question. Many thanks" (Press conference of Pope Francis during the return flight, 28 July 2013, available in www.vatican.va).

²¹ Juan Manuel Mora, "Universities Inspired by Catholicism: Identity, Culture, Communication", *Romana* n°54, January-June 2012. Available in http://en.romana.org/art/54_8.0_1.

²² "With the holy intent of communicating the truth about God and humanity, we sometimes give them a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian. In this way, we hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance. This is the greatest danger. Let us never forget that «the expression of truth can take different forms. The renewal of these forms of expression becomes necessary for the sake of transmitting to the people of today the Gospel message in its unchanging meaning»" (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 41).

²³ Promoted by Jack Valero and Austen Ivereigh, on the occasion of Pope Benedict's visit to the UK in 2010. Further information is available at www.catholicvoices.org.uk.

²⁴ Cf. Paul Watzlawick et al., *Pragmatics of Human Communication*, 1967, chapter 6. This concept can be defined as a seemingly true statement that contradicts a situation which seems to defy logic. The order "be spontaneous" is a classic example: the contradiction arises between the pragmatic imperative and the content of the comment.

contradiction. Therefore there is a need to find the common value from which a new argument can be formulated which re-establishes the overall coherency of values.²⁵

This dialogue method, known as “reframing”, contributes to the promotion of a mutually respectful relationship that avoids condemnation of others and recognizes in all people a certain rectitude in their desires for the good of society. As a communicative challenge, “reframing” seeks to privilege open relationships: friendship as a starting point. Thus, the relationship is enhanced and a better context to share personal convictions is established. Multiplying relationships based on respectful and honest communication²⁶ is the most direct way to establish a culture of dialogue.

At the same time, there is a relationship between the communicator and the message. Personal history and status give legitimacy to a public voice. When Mother Teresa of Calcutta offered to care for children who would be aborted, a positive global impact came about, as opposed to similar statements by George W. Bush or, on another level, by Justin Bieber or Jack Nicholson. Legitimacy is built every day, by partaking in society’s difficulties, by living Christian values side by side with everyone else, by learning to show that Catholic identity is also manifested in values shared by others, and not just by those that are circumstantially controversial. “Charity and justice give credibility and depth to the educational task as a whole”²⁷.

In view of the above, each situation of communication includes intrinsic goals. When the situation explicitly permits the exhibition of its own framework of interpretation (level 1), it is possible to make specific statements (level 2) with a reasonable expectation that they will be interpreted properly. All the while, at times it is difficult to avoid tension within the communication environment due to the fact that no values are shared in common in particular cases²⁸, one can always try to communicate in terms that facilitate honest and positive decoding, offering –with words and attitudes– a clear description of one’s own position and a framework of mutual respect.

“It's not what you say, it's what people hear”²⁹, stated Frank Luntz, a well-known expert in public opinion. Positive communication should be based on this law of reception and placed within this paradigm: what is most important is that which stays in the minds and hearts of the recipients. In dealing with certain issues, if the appropriate framework is not established, for example, to express Catholic doctrine on

²⁵ Take, for example, the case in which one invokes mercy and love for a person and proposes to euthanize him or her in order to put an end to the suffering. “For the sake of love you must take away his or her life”. To disarm this paradox one ought to argue from the common value of mercy, that the best way of living charity is to help the those who suffer discover meaning in their pain improve their quality of life by accompanying them, taking care of them, showing love for them.

²⁶ Erving Goffman, op. cit.: “Society is organized on the principle that any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in a correspondingly appropriate way. Connected with this principle is a second, namely that an individual who implicitly or explicitly signifies that he has certain social characteristics ought to have this claim honoured by others and ought in fact to be what he claims he is”.

²⁷ Juan Manuel Mora, op. cit.

²⁸ If necessary, one should have “the courage to speak uncomfortable truths which do not please public opinion, but which are necessary to safeguard the authentic good of society” (John Paul II, *Ex corde Ecclesiae*, II Part, Article 32).

²⁹ Cf. Frank Luntz, *Words that work*, Hyperion Books, New York, 2007, 324 pp.

in vitro fertilization or gay marriage, it can be taken as an act of discrimination or as if to say "you should not have been born". However, in an event held in St. Peter's Square on Valentine's Day with thousands of couples to celebrate the marriage engagements, the Pope is assured of the positive context necessary to propose the ideal of unceasing love and urge that it not let itself be defeated by a culture characterized by that which is provisional³⁰.

Finally, the importance of words deserves a mention³¹. There are terms that in a given culture or context, activate a framework of interpretation –whether historical, theoretical, or political– that is potentially explosive. Just as a slogan recreates an entire brand experience, particular words connote a specific conceptual universe. For example, the use of the word *shoah*; the dichotomy "*military government-military dictatorship*", the use of certain terms or adjectives expressing ethnicity as "African American"; the change in tone invoked by using the Spanish word "merca" when referring to drugs (used several times by Cardinal Bergoglio in Buenos Aires); derogatory terms as "*lefty*" or "*chauvinist*". These are words packed with meaning that can function as *ideologemes* (textual expressions that condense a thought or ideology) or as *signals* of a larger framework³². It is important to pay attention to them because, both by their use or omission, regardless of the speaker's intentions, they produce a decisive influence on the interpretation and will be used to label the speaker. Finally, it ought to be mentioned that there are semantic connotations that are the result of the connection of certain words in a given lexicon: the term "education" does not give rise to the same interpretation when it is combined with "freedom" and "security", than when it is combined with terms such as "inclusion", "equality" and "containment".

In summary, when preparing to communicate a specific social value one ought to use an adequate definition of the communication situation as a starting point, be precise in the preparation and delivery of the public discourse, and lean on his or her legitimacy as the speaker.

³⁰ The full discourse can be found at

http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2014/february/documents/papa-francesco_20140214_incontro-fidanzati.html.

³¹ "When preparing a speech, the main obstacle of communication is not the complexity of the message, but the opacity of language" (Juan Manuel Mora, *10 ensayos de comunicación institucional*, EUNSA, Pamplona, 2009, p. 54). Original version is in Spanish.

³² Cf. Luciano Elizalde, "Conflictividad y conflictos en el escenario público argentino", in *Conexiones*, Vol. 2, Núm. 1, 2010, p. 79-98, especially the section "En búsqueda de una posición pública y de un posicionamiento", p. 93-94.



7) The framework of values as the fundamental message

The new social scenario has shaped a communication situation that urges Christian communicators to concentrate their energies on *the first level* of their message, in their general framework of values³³. I.e., to speak over and over again about charity –their essential value–, so that they can rebuild a shared framework, a *conditio sine qua non* for correct interpretation on the following levels.

Questions about the framework are neither obvious nor secondary issues. They are, on the contrary, fundamental. After all, the frame is the bridge that connects with today's culture, it is the raw material to weave a new shared cultural matrix: charity towards all, especially with those who are experiencing difficult times. It is the condition that grants credibility so that one's ideas about less shared values can be “heard” and understood as a service³⁴. In this way, the principle of gradualness in social processes is upheld³⁵.

As explained, this fundamental value –perhaps self-evident for Catholics– is questioned because certain Christian values that are not shared today by public opinion are in

³³ "First of all, it's necessary to consider the "frame" or "approach" that may be necessary to express and communicate, in which the rest of the messages should be rooted. The frame should be the first message to be thought of and shaped " (Luciano Elizalde, *Ídem*, p. 93). Original version is in Spanish.

³⁴ On this issue, Mariano Fazio said in the Argentinean newspaper *La Nación*, commenting on Pope Francis' pastoral style, that it is only in the context of love that one can understand the moral demands of the Gospel. Full text available at <http://www.lanacion.com.ar/1622346-una-nueva-pastoral-cercana-e-inclusiva>.

³⁵ "Social trends have a complex life: they are born, grow, develop, change and die. Consequently, communicating ideas has a lot to do with gardening: sowing, watering, pruning, cleaning, waiting; before the harvest comes" (Juan Manuel Mora, "Ten keys for communicating faith", *Scripta Theologica*, Dec 2012, Vol. 44 Issue 3, p. 739. Also published in Italian: "Proviamo a convincere senza voler sconfiggere" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21-VIII-2011, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/proviamo-a-convincere-senza-voler-sconfiggere#.U2ef-vl5Md0>).

tension with the so called "new rights" by which many legitimize abortion, euthanasia, and the prohibition of expressing religious identity in public. In such a situation, charity and respect should be the primary content of any communication of Christian values. Many of Pope Francis' great gestures, for instance, are being used to rebuild a common framework and provide an opportunity to move from a "*field hospital*" to a "*community hospital*". In a community there are bonds already shared, personal relationships which foster dialogue on controversial issues without the risk of being misunderstood. Once the frame has been established, it is possible to discuss other values and proposals. With the bridge built, you can cross the river. Therefore, the construction of the bridge (communication of a framework of values) is the first and foremost goal.

Along these lines, it is worthwhile to take into consideration two sets of Christian values: those that permeate our society and those that suffer opposition. The *Doctrinal note on some questions regarding The Participation of Catholics in Political Life*³⁶ offers a lengthy list of the former: the promotion of human rights, social justice, dignity of women, access to education, the economy at the service of the person and the common good, and peace as fruit of justice and solidarity. A Christian-based educational center should recognize the importance of promoting these widely accepted values, although not always universally practiced, as a key part of its message and task, as well as an opportunity to strengthen the framework and develop common bonds.

These ties will make it easier to communicate and propose values that encounter resistance. The key is to not limit communication to values that are being confronted. Such efforts run the risk of distorting Christian identity, presenting it in a negative, aggressive way, lacking in a framework proposal. Ultimately they would fall into the fallacy of proportionality.

If an educational center fails to communicate its framework and to build social legitimacy through shared community problems, and sends messages as if to be an inspector of behaviors that are promoted both in public opinion and legislation, it very well might receive harsh sanctions from its environment in the form of fines, inspections, revocation of financial aid and licenses, and even closing orders. The real challenge is to communicate in a positive way, integrating specific proposals within a shared values framework³⁷.

To sum it up in a practical way, depending on the characteristics of a statement's context, the communication of values which may be controversial ought to follow the following maxim: "in an open situation, a central value proposal; in a closed situation, a

³⁶ Available at www.vatican.va.

³⁷ It is important to highlight that when a communicator fails in transmitting a social value and receives these kinds of sanctions, a spiral of silence envelops him, that is to say, others social actors will prefer not to take the risk to be sanctioned and will avoid expressing publicly their points of view. Because of this, it's also important to develop a positive public discourse, so that the position of communication in the public square offers a relatively reliable support for potential speakers of Christian values.

proposal of a framework of values". If the communication situation allows for the exposition of one's own interpretation context, then it is feasible to reach more concrete and specific definitions. However, if a closed context limits the interpretation framework or restricts it by including certain prejudices against Christian values and thus labeling them as intolerant, then it is better to speak on the primary level and clarify one's framework and its main value: respect, honesty, and the practice of charity. It is possible that these latter circumstances be taken as a provocation, although it might not be the actual intention. And avoiding a direct response to the provocation –it is always possible to react in an elegant and cordial way– will also be an indicator of maturity and practical intelligence³⁸.

In 2012, following a controversy in which she was involved due to an unfortunate statement, a university professor from Uruguay wrote: "I want to share with you that from personal experience, I discovered the importance of words and of other people's perception. Nowadays, society is more attentive to respecting different sensibilities. In the public square, good intentions and commitment are not enough, it is also necessary to learn how to express ourselves in the proper manner, being respectful with everyone. As a Catholic, I recognize in this challenge the importance of learning how to live charity and solidarity once and again. Society demands that we learn to be respectful of each other, even in specific topics in which there is a great divergence of values" ³⁹. That "as a Catholic" highlights the relevance of the framework of values. In a world so full of misunderstandings, it should be emphasized once and again that respecting all people is the heart of an authentic Christian identity.

8) Some key ideas and practical suggestions

Lastly, here are four key ideas for the communication of values in educational institutions with a Christian identity, taking into consideration the two statement making situations touched on earlier:

1) Build a common framework: the best way to rebuild a positive statement context is to explicit and transmit institutional principles⁴⁰, vision and mission, and effectively making them take root in the organizational culture⁴¹ such that they soak into initiatives, ideas, daily practices, decision criteria and paradigms. Thus, respect and dialogue, guided by charity, authenticity, and solidarity, will become the common sense of the organization, not on paper but in every day life. Dialogue is the communicational situation that is based on a common understanding of mutual respect. In plural

³⁸ Otherwise, answering with an outburst might lead to being trapped in a negative context and falling into a blunder, which would produce negative consequences of uncertain scope.

³⁹ Mercedes Rovira's letter, published in *Revista Búsqueda*, Uruguay, 20-IX-2012.

⁴⁰ "The mission statement is a fundamental document from the point of view of both internal and external communication, the 'first word' of its public discourse, of its institutional 'narrative'" (Juan Manuel Mora, "Universities Inspired by Catholicism: Identity, Culture, Communication", *Romana* n°54, January-June 2012. Available in http://en.romana.org/art/54_8.0_1).

⁴¹ Juan Manuel Mora -op. cit.- points out: "In the case of a university, these specific features are given expression in the activities carried out there: research, teaching, other corporate activities, relationships".

societies, dialogue is the way to build social well-being; this is the only way to establish a context of consensus in which constructive dissent on specific values is possible.

2) Propose your own convictions using common values as a starting point: reframing involves not only a search for common ground, but also constant intellectual engagement. Furthermore, it helps to build open relationships. Some have found that workshops between managers and teachers with the objective of exchanging experiences related to positive ways in which one can address, for example, value issues in the classroom and in interviews with students, to be helpful. The effort to find the right words⁴² and a cordial tone fosters the true meaning of respect, which begins with carefully listening to the others⁴³, and must be accompanied by clarity and relevance as characteristics of the message⁴⁴.

3. Engage social problems within the community: work and communication priorities ought to accompany community needs and concerns. The Christian identity of an educational institution is expressed in its care for the environment and its work on common issues, such as the eradication of poverty, the promotion of youth work, ecology, and the fight against violence in its different forms, such as teen bullying. This enables one to avoid a narrow perspective that only looks to an agenda composed of controversial issues⁴⁵.

4. Identify legitimized speakers: assess who is the person or organization entitled to communicate certain messages to different audiences, taking into consideration that coherence and personal or institutional history are key elements, along with the ability to empathize. An open authentic tone is also necessary.

In this way, educational institutions can effectively communicate their corporate identity, addressing sensitive issues with a constructive spirit, aware that communication is a human action⁴⁶, and therefore should be imbued with charity and consideration of the others and of ways in which to help. Spreading Christian identity has nothing to do with imposing one's own categories; that would be –using a graphic phrase of Rodríguez Luño– sacrificing freedom and charity on the altar of truth⁴⁷.

⁴² In his famous *On Liberty*, John Stuart Mill points out with a fine descriptive eye: "In general, opinions contrary to those commonly received can only obtain a hearing by studied moderation of language, and the most cautious avoidance of unnecessary offence".

⁴³ "Listening helps us to find the right gesture and word which shows that we are more than simple bystanders" (Francis, *Evangelii Gaudium*, n. 171).

⁴⁴ Cf. Juan Manuel Mora, "Ten keys for communicating faith", *Scripta Theologica*, Dec 2012, Vol. 44 Issue 3, p. 739. Also published in Italian: "Proviamo a convincere senza voler sconfiggere" in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 21-VIII-2011, <http://www.osservatoreromano.va/it/news/proviamo-a-convincere-senza-voler-sconfiggere#.U2ef-vl5Md0>.

⁴⁵ In some cases, it may be more suitable for the mission of a particular educational institution focusing in the promotion of the Christian values of no-violence and solidarity behind the bullying problem, or of social justice (i.e. in a School of Economy), than insisting always and almost exclusively in other issues as abortion or legislation about marriage.

⁴⁶ Cf. Manuel Martín Algarra, *Teoría de la comunicación: una propuesta*, Tecnos, Madrid, 2003, 179 pp.

⁴⁷ Cf. Ángel Rodríguez Luño, op. cit., chapter IX: "El problema del relativismo" [The problem of relativism]: "The relativist mentality is open to many different criticisms. But what one should never do is to reinforce, with one's words or attitudes, what is most persuasive in that mentality. That is to say, whoever attacks relativism should never give the impression that he is disposed to sacrifice freedom on the altar of truth. Rather one should make clear that one is very

Identity is a starting point –ideology, however, is an ending point–, from which each and everyone walks his own way.

This is the great challenge in contemporary culture: to be able to give pertinent answers to the big questions, so that Christian institutions can collaborate in building a fairer, more inclusive society, that is respectful of the dignity of every person, and that helps give meaning to our lives and to those of our fellow citizens. Good communication is an essential component of this ambitious objective.

Juan Pablo Cannata – jcannata@austral.edu.ar.

Professor of Sociology and Communication (Universidad Austral, Buenos Aires)

Author of *Los valores en el discurso público* [*Social Values in Public Discourse*]; Ed. Logos, Argentina.

Communication consultant for Educational Institutions in Argentina, Uruguay and Paraguay.