

Who Speaks for the Vatican?

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A Journalist Comments on Joaquín Navarro Valls' Credibility

VALENCIA, Spain, MAY 18, 2006 (Zenit) - A professor of journalism thinks that Vatican press office director Joaquín Navarro Valls is a model spokesman.

An expert in information and persuasion, María José Pou-Amérigo delivered the key address when the Vatican spokesman was conferred an honorary doctorate by the Cardinal Herrera-Ceu University of Valencia.

Pou-Amérigo teaches a course on specialized religious information at the university and writes a column for Valencia's newspaper Las Provincias. She is a member of the Catholic Association of Spokesmen.

Q: What was Navarro Valls' strategy during John Paul II's hospitalizations and death?

Pou-Amérigo: Without a doubt, the starting point was credibility, gained over years as a spokesman. I think the clearest proof of that credibility is the fact that the press worldwide gave the same account of the Pope's death, though none of the 6,000 journalists accredited those days to the Holy See saw him.

Only one journalist was present -- Navarro Valls -- and he reported it. To date, no one has questioned that it all happened as he said.

To that credibility must be added the decision to offer only facts and not emotional assessments....

Q: In what sense does Navarro Valls "play" at persuading as a spokesman?

Pou-Amérigo: Any spokesman must be a good persuader, understanding persuasion as the capacity to convince with proofs, arguments -- not with trickery or by sweetening the facts.

I doubt that Navarro Valls sees it as a game or, as happens with other spokesmen, as a cleverly designed strategy. Rather, he follows the line established by John Paul II -- or between the two of them -- of giving access to the truth without fearing that it be known. This does not prevent his having, in addition, a great capacity for conviction.

Q: What are the "ethos," "pathos" and "logos" in persuasion?

Pou-Amérigo: According to the classics, they are three essential elements in any process of persuasion.

The "ethos" refers to the orator, his character, the image he projects, and the values associated with him.

The "pathos" is the *mise-en-scène*, the elements that surround the discourse, recourse to the emotional factor.

The "logos," instead, is the address itself, the arguments, the appeals to reason.

In the case of Navarro Valls, his credibility comes from the solidity of his "ethos," his control of his emotions and the constant appeal to reason, to proofs. Along with this, one must not forget the use he makes of some resources with "dissolving" effects, when faced with troublesome questions, such as subtleties, and recourse to common sense or humor.

Q: You allude to Navarro Valls' capacity to introduce pauses, irony and other resources in his addresses. Are they techniques or does he have this natural authority combined with an ability to communicate?

Pou-Américo: Personally, I think Navarro Valls' genius is his ability to combine instinct and technique.

I would say he has several personal qualities -- great intelligence, capacity of observation, analytical acuity and prudence -- that, accompanied by certain learned techniques and others incorporated by trial and error, have made him develop a style of spokesman that is very good for the Church.

To this must be added his sense of service and obedience to the Church, which disciplines his ego and avoids any personal pride of authorship and, finally, his openness to criticism, which has possibly chiseled his work to the point of becoming a model for the future.

Q: Do you think that if Joaquín Navarro Valls had not had access to the Pope during his illness and death that he would not have reported so well?

Pou-Américo: I think, simply, that he would not have reported. The reason is clear: For someone who had lived with John Paul II a pontificate willing to show the reality of man in all his dimensions, also in sorrow and sickness, the culmination of that course is, undoubtedly, to show death as part of life and, for the believer, as access to eternal life.

From my point of view, Navarro Valls' work in the last days of John Paul II was one more example of his function over these years: to help John Paul II -- and, with him, the whole Church -- to teach us to live and die in Christ.