

THE CATHOLIC REGISTER – MAY 20, 1989

By Father Gregory Smith - Special to the Register

POPE'S PRESS MAN TAKES ON A TOUGH ROLE

The Italian word “portavoce” means megaphone. It also means press spokesman. Joaquín Navarro-Valls is portavoce to the Pope.

His official title, of course, is less intimidating. Dr. Navarro-Valls is “director of the Press Office of the Holy See”. But what it comes down to is an awesome responsibility: speaking on behalf of the Supreme Pontiff and the Holy See to the journalists of Rome and the world.

Still, if anyone is equipped for the challenge, Dr. Navarro-Valls is a medical doctor who taught medicine and psychiatry for 14 years, he made a dramatic career switch that began his path to the Vatican by becoming a foreign correspondent for the Spanish press.

Immaculate white cuffs showing beneath his navy blazer, hair slightly streaked with gray, the director projects confidence and ability in one of the toughest jobs in Rome. “On a day like today when nothing's happening,” he said in an interview, “we receive an average of 200 calls, three-quarters of them from outside Italy.”

Not so long ago, Dr. Navarro-Valls would have been making such calls instead of receiving them. In 1983, he was elected president of the Italian Foreign Press Association, the first Catholic ever to hold the position. This accomplishment was soon to be overshadowed. A year later he became the first layman - and the first non-Italian - to serve as director of the Vatican press office.

The appointment was no token. Journalists accustomed to the efficiency - and the candor - of media spokesmen for large organizations and governments were finding the Vatican's style increasingly hard to take. Questions were often taken on notice, and answered by a priest-director a full week later. The time had come for a professional.

“I was very pleased with the idea of seeing a layman appointed,” Dr. Navarro said, recalling that he had travelled with the Pope on some of his trips abroad. “But I wasn't necessarily pleased it was me”.

Mixed reactions from others greeted the arrival of the new director. For many, the fact that a non-Italian would speak for the Holy See was a welcome sign of the universality of the Church. Others, however, were quick to question his link to Opus Dei, the conservative group of priests and lay people founded in Spain.

Dr. Navarro-Valls shrugs off the criticism, and speaks warmly of his ties to the personal prelature known to enjoy the Pope's favor.

“Opus Dei has taught me how to sanctify my job - whether medicine or journalism,” he said.

“This is what it is all about - to put into the very context of your life the idea that you must find Jesus Christ in your work, or else you have lost your opportunity.”

Certainly an interviewer can't help be impressed by the mixture of efficiency and devotion the director brings to his job. “Naturally, it is not just a matter of organization.” Dr. Navarro-Valls said. “The message is much more important than the effort.”

How does the Pope's spokesman know what to say? For starters, he knows when not to talk, and refers many specific questions to local bishops who, Dr. Navarro-Valls stressed, he is “very careful” not to bypass.

But when comment is called for, Joaquín Navarro-Valls is ready, because he makes it one of his chief priorities “to study and to understand the mind of the Holy Father. and consequently the mind of the Holy See as a complex body that helps the Pope in his duties.

“In order to achieve this, it is necessary to read and read carefully everything published by the Holy See, but also to reflect on the content and the context,” he added.

Still, on some points it is necessary to consult the Pope personally. Dr. Navarro-Valls said he still finds it “amazing” how Pope John Paul will make himself available despite the many pressures he faces.

Perhaps the Pope has some idea of the pressures on his spokesman. In addition to fielding inquiries from the world's reporters, Dr. Navarro-Valls prepares daily press digests for the Holy See, prepares for the presentation of major documents and papal addresses, while “always looking ahead to the next trip.”

When the Holy Father travels, it is the Vatican Press Office which must organize accreditation, press facilities, news releases and countless other details.

Dr. Navarro-Valls remains serene amid the hectic pace of such a job, enabled by his deep personal spirituality to find God's will in work.

“I am sure that when I die, Our Lord will take my work into account,” he said, “and ask what I have done with the years spent close to the Holy Father.”

(Fr. Smith is a priest of the Archdiocese of Vancouver.)
