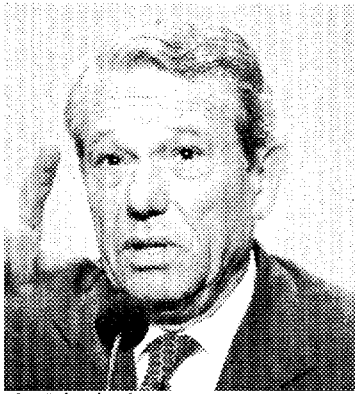


## Vatican Strives for 'House of Glass' Approach With Media



By Gabriel Kahn

**VATICAN CITY**—As it hauls itself into the third millennium, the Catholic Church is straining to complete an ambitious process of renewal, from establishing new contacts with other faiths to reconciling troubling issues in its own past.

Remarkably, one area where the austere walls of the Vatican have already come down is in its relationship with the modern mass media.

That was never more evident than on Tuesday, when the Vatican released its first-ever official position on the "Ethics of Communication." The 40-page document written in a prose that is unusually lively by Vatican standards, engages in some soul-searching, even finger-pointing the media's role in modern society. But it also offers some frank assessments about the church's own tendency toward "unnecessary secrecy" and acknowledges that "the media contribute to people's spiritual enrichment in extraordinary ways."

Indeed, many would say that an astute use of the media to convey the church's message is one of the great hallmarks of Pope John Paul II's papacy. His globetrotting tours are front-page events and the pontiff himself holds a fascination for the press that none of his predecessors were ever able to attain.

From his office just off St. Peter's Square, Dr. Joaquin Navarro-Valls, 62, the Vatican spokesman credited with revolutionizing the Holy See's press operation, recalled a key moment in the Pope's rapport with journalists during a 1987 papal trip to Los Angeles.

"That morning the Pope had given an interesting speech in Hollywood at the Universal Studios where Charlton Heston and others were in attendance. It had a real Hollywood flavor. An anchorwoman from a major network later asked me why the Pope had such an interest in television." I said, "That's an interesting question. But first I'd like to ask you a question. Can you tell me why television has such an interest in this Pope? You see, the dialectic between this Pope and the media is

much more complex."

Today, the Vatican begins three days of festivities for the Jubilee for journalists, part of the Holy Year calendar. Tomorrow's highlight involves a combination press conference-religious ceremony in the cavernous Chapel of Paul VI, with live feeds from Manila, Johannesburg and Washington.

In almost every respect, the Vatican now operates a sophisticated, modern press operation that distributes the church's message around the world in numerous languages, even in Latin. It operates a vast web site and a high-tech press center just opened up — in a renovated red-light theater — to handle the overflow of journalists during the year-long Jubilee celebrations.

"It is an obligation to inform, and it is a right of the people to know," said Dr. Navarro-Valls. "It is not just a tactic."

Much, to be sure, might still be desired. Questions about the Pope's health, for example, are routinely dismissed and, outside the press office, much of the Vatican still regards the media with suspicion, even hostility.

But it is light years from the stealthy silence and chaos that reigned just a few decades ago.

When Father Romeo Panciroli, Dr. Navarro-Valls's predecessor, had something important to announce, he would march into the smoke-filled press room and clap his hands twice to get journalists' attention. On one occasion, he had to stand on a table and shout. Little was written down and articles were often riddled with factual errors.

"The old Vatican journalists used to hang out underneath L'Osservatore Romano," said Federico Mondillo, who covered the Holy See for 30 years for the ANSA news agency, referring to the Vatican's official paper. "You had to depend on rumor and all the quotes were unattributed. It was like trying to navigate by moonlight."

This led to several major public relations gaffes. Mr. Mondillo recalled one such moment in the 1970s, when a journalist for Il Giornale asked Father Panciroli if the Chinese delegation would be present at a United Nations conference which it had been expected to boycott. Father Panciroli responded that he thought the Chinese would attend and the story, though wrong, was plastered on the front page, citing Vatican sources. "It was probably the one time when Panciroli didn't give his stock answer of 'I don't know anything about it,'" said Mr. Mondillo.

Others recalled being amazed when Cardinal Domenico Tardini called the first ever Vatican "presser" in 1961.

The rampant unprofessionalism led Pope John Paul II to usher in a series of changes, among which prominent-

ly figured the hiring of Dr. Navarro-Valls. A one-time professor of psychiatry, he spent several years covering the eastern Mediterranean for Spanish newspapers. In 1984, the Pope asked him to run the press office.

One of his first tasks was to take a survey of Vatican reporting from around the world to see how much information came from official sources and how much information was unofficial or unspecified. "Only 20 percent of the information came out of this office," he said. "My main concern was to give them enough information and access and to put some professionalism into the way that we release information."

A survey conducted ten years later showed that the trend had been reversed, with 80 percent of the information coming from his office. "I don't think that is control. I think it is a sign of reliability and trust," he said.

But the new approach toward the media is a much grander project than weeding out errors in newspapers. It is part of a conscious decision on the part of the church to use the media to get its message across.

The "Communications" document released this week stated the task quite succinctly: "The Church has the mission of proclaiming the Gospel till the end of time. Today, she knows that it requires using the media."

"A document like this tries to open up the church to the world," said Archbishop John Foley, the president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, which produced the tome. He acknowledged that, in the past, the closed culture of the Vatican "made it difficult to answer some of the legitimate questions asked by journalists."

"We want to make the church, in the words of Pope John Paul II, into a house of glass," he said.

That might be an over-ambitious goal for a hierarchical organization like the Vatican. But never before has a Pope been so attentive to the media. Each day he peruses a fat stack of global press clippings on a host of issues. While he has granted only a handful of interviews, he frequently dialogues and corresponds with journalists.

He has also undertaken grandiose gestures, such as his recent trip to Jerusalem, that have made him the focus of the world's attention. Dr. Navarro-Valls noted with satisfaction at how the Pope's visit to the Holy Land occupied the front-page of the world's most important newspapers. President Clinton's important trip to the new nuclear powers, India and Pakistan, happened at the same time, but was relegated to the inside pages.

"There is a sort of complicity between the media and this papacy," said Dr. Navarro-Valls. "It's something that should be used as a test case in journalism school."