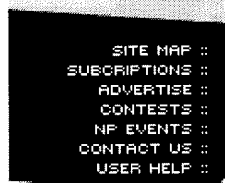
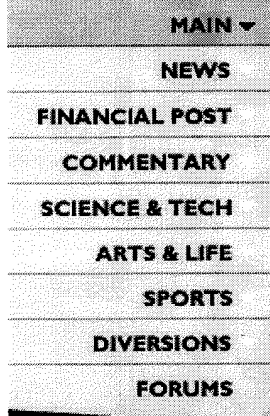




WEATHER | CAREERS | HEADLINE SCAN | E-MAIL UPDATE ---Shortcut



E-MAIL  
THIS STORY



PRINT  
THIS PAGE

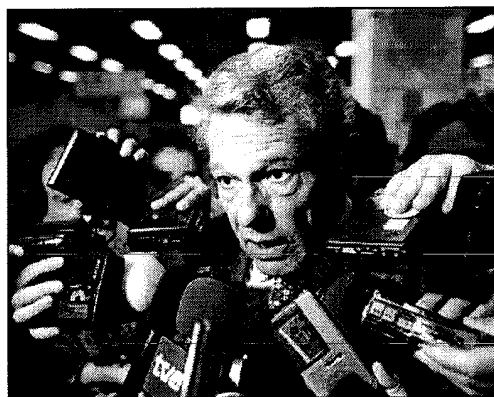
## Pope's faithful servant

The Holy See's PR man pontificates, of course. But he does not spin

John Bentley Mays

National Post

VATICAN CITY - Going only by the numbers, Joaquin Navarro-Valls is a very small player in the information business. The smartly tailored Spaniard is chief spokesman for the CEO of a company with only 2,500 employees. His office consists of about a dozen assistants. He lives over the store.



Photographer, New Service

But if your boss happens to be Pope John Paul II and your job is to keep some 300 news-gathering agencies up to speed on what the head of the billion-member Catholic Church is doing and saying, your words have a way of travelling very far, very fast.

**JOAQUIN NAVARRO-VALLS: "If you try to do catechism through information, there will be nothing but confusion."**

Navarro-Valls is smart, smooth and magnetically charming, and clearly enjoys being all of the above. Like John Paul before illness and age began taking their toll, he's got a knack for leavening high moral seriousness with a smile as big as the Ritz. But the Pope was looking for more than smiles when he named Navarro-Valls his director of communications in 1984.

"I think the general idea was to try to professionalize this place," he said. "From the very beginning of his pontificate, the curiosity and interest in the media about this Pope was tremendous. If he wanted to respond to this interest, he needed someone he could trust. What was needed at the time was a new approach to all the ways the Holy See was communicating to the world, especially the media, and that's the task I took on."

An early survey indicated only a fraction of what the western press was saying about the Vatican came from the Holy See press office, with the rest based on anonymous insider gossip. "It was pure pathology. The space for confusion and misunderstanding was huge."

So, with strong backing from the Pope, Navarro-Valls quickly distanced the Vatican's media operation from the intrigues of Church bureaucracy and set about building its reputation as a direct pipeline to John Paul's office. Another survey in 1994, 10 years into his mandate, indicated his department had largely achieved its goal.

The turnaround could not have happened, however, without the establishment of new respect between the press office and the press. "These are the journalists I take questions from, I give briefings to. If you need deep background information, I will give you that -- whatever you need -- then, after that, you're free. I have to rely on your ethics ... Depending on the good sense of people is more important, more effective, than trying to spin the news."

Asked to name the potential PR disaster that had tempted him most severely to cook the information as a way to to save the Pope and the Church from embarrassment, interestingly, he picked a touchy media battle he and John Paul lost, hands down.

It all began early in 1993.

"You remember when war and complete chaos in the Balkans exploded some years ago," he said. "There was a lot of 'ethnic cleansing' devised by some Serbian generals, and a lot of Muslim women were raped. The moral problem was what these women were to do. Abortion? On that occasion, the Holy Father released a letter -- a splendid letter -- answering and attacking this problem."

The message urged Bosnia's Catholics to rally behind the 20,000 Muslim "mothers, wives and children who, for the venting of racial hatred or brutal lust, have undergone violence ..." The task was to "help them transform an act of violence into an act of love and welcome." Groups supporting abortion, and journalists everywhere, accused John Paul of exploiting the tragedy merely to push the Church's teaching on abortion.

"But the Holy Father didn't even say that! The Pope was really saying that he understood and was deeply saddened by the problems of those people. The moral problem was, how can you create an atmosphere of serenity, sympathy and understanding around these women, in which their decision will be free? Free from the Muslim religious assumption that women who have been raped are impure?"

John Paul's assertion of the sanctity of life at such a horrible moment was radical, and may have been ill-timed. But, as Navarro-Valls kept pointing out, the Pope was merely saying what the Church believes about life and the power of love to transform even the worst situations. You may not agree with John Paul's propositions. But, insisted Navarro-

None of it worked. The director's explanations of the Pope's motives and actual words were dismissed, his attempts to place the papal statements in context ignored. But Navarro-Valls did walk off this scorched battlefield with one victory. He had successfully kept the Holy See press office from spin-doctoring the Pope's comments, and he had done his job: explaining the content and background of what the Pope had said.

If that's an old-fashioned, soberly rational way to do institutional PR, then so be it. Postmodern word-gaming is notably absent from Navarro-Valls' theory of mass communications. During medical studies leading to his first career as a psychiatrist, he had decided facts exist, and they count. They were convictions he had in his suitcase when he took a break from teaching medicine in Granada in the early 1970s and came to Italy.

"I had some spare time, and I began writing about politics and other things that interested me. And to my surprise, a newspaper in my country asked me if I wanted to become a foreign correspondent. I tried it for a few months, and it completely changed my life."

By 1984, however, he had all but decided to go back to teaching. "But there are things in life that you cannot plan beforehand." One is a request from the Pope to become a media wrangler. Another is an invitation from God to serve humankind and the Church single-mindedly -- while staying squarely in the secular world.

Everybody knows the answer Navarro-Valls gave John Paul. And many know the answer he gave to God: celibate membership in Opus Dei, a fellowship of devout Catholic layfolk active in the professions and public life.

Asked whether keen devotion to Christianity and dispassionate reporting on the Church might be incompatible, Navarro-Valls almost jumped out of his chair.

"Catechism is one thing, information is another! If you try to do catechism through information, there will be nothing but confusion ... From the very beginning of its 2,000-year history, the Catholic Church has developed the proper means of communicating [Christian belief] -- the family, Catholic schools, parishes."

Only God knows whether the teaching of the Church is really touching hearts and minds. But success in the information business can be gauged simply by watching TV. Are Church teachings being accurately reported? Much of the time, believes Navarro-Valls, they are.

"Nobody reading newspapers around the world can have any misunderstandings about the position of the Holy See and the Catholic Church on the stability of family life, the dignity of the person, the Church's commitment to human rights and so on. And when there's criticism? The criticism is confirmation that the message went through -

- that it was understood. So you don't like it? That's up to you!"

But the very effectiveness of mass media can raise unreal expectations. "You've got this enthusiasm even in the Catholic Church for thinking the Internet is going to solve all the pastoral problems of the Church. Don't get me wrong! I'm interested in the Internet, I was the one who opened the Holy See to the Internet. But let's keep things in their place. One thing is the transmission of faith in the atmosphere of family life, with your children and so on -- then there's the Internet. It's not the same thing. The good-sense position is that it's a new means of communicating and getting information. You must use it, but realize the limits of the medium."

If, of course, you can use it at all. "After so many years of the Internet, I think four out of five computers connected to it are in one part of the world -- the United States. If you don't speak English, you are lost on the Internet. And if you go to Africa or Asia, millions -- billions -- of people aren't connected. You can get the dangerous idea that you're in touch with the world, when you're only in touch with your peers."

"It's a risk of pathology -- of seeing only yourself there."

The image Navarro-Valls paints is eerie. It evokes a delusional, selfish state in which someone imagines he's reached cosmic consciousness, when in fact he's self-imprisoned in a hall of mirrors. It's also a picture, a little too accurate for comfort, of the techno-optimistic paganism of affluent, plugged-in, million-channel North American culture.

The world according to Navarro-Valls is bigger, more various, less predictable. "Don't forget that, when we plan our work here, we are not thinking exclusively of that small part of the world which we call the Western world. What does secularization mean in Africa? The problem there is not that they don't believe in God. It's that they believe in too many gods! Let's keep things in perspective -- otherwise we become 'Western-centric.' From the very beginning, this office has tried to keep in mind the globalization of information."

That morning, the director of the Holy See press office was heading into a day less philosophical than full of nitty-gritty. The Pope was scheduled to meet that afternoon with Vladimir Putin, the Russian president. So Navarro-Valls knew where he would be minutes after Putin motored away: in the Pope's office, finding out what was said, and preparing the news to go out the morning after.

Next day, the dry press release said the topics ranged from "the process of integration between East and West" to disarmament. Nothing had been said about the thing Western media finds most fascinating about Vatican pronouncements, which is sex. But the subjects talked over between the leaders of Russia's millions and the Catholic Church's millions are crucial, if the world, East and West, is to have any future at all.

It's a world the Pope can ill-afford not to think about. In the 22 years of

John Paul's pontificate, the centre of gravity in the Church served by the Vatican has continued to move south on the world map, from increasing indifferent North America and Europe to the zone of Christian growth stretching across South America, Africa, Asia, Oceania. The good news for Navarro-Valls is that, where the Gospel goes, a radically new culture of information can follow.

"There is absolutely no incompatibility between spreading wide the message of the Church and [the task of] the mass media. The atmosphere in which the free press grows, even geographically, is where the values of Christianity have arrived -- respect for opinions of others, respect for the integrity of the person. There, strong and helpful and very healthy journalism can grow."

---

[Main](#) | [News](#) | [Financial Post](#) | [Commentary](#) | [Science & Tech](#) | [Arts & Life](#) | [Sports](#) | [Diversions](#) | [Forums](#) | [Weather](#)  
[Careers](#) | [Subscriptions](#) | [Site Map](#) | [Headline Scan](#) | [Advertise](#) | [Contests](#) | [NP Events](#) | [Contact Us](#) | [User Help](#)

**Copyright © 2000 National Post Online | [Privacy Policy](#) | [Corrections](#)**