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A Doctor-Spokesman Attends to Papal Image

By JOHN TAGLIABUE

ROME — "These cardinals," said Joaquín Navarro-Valls with mock chagrin as he swept a visitor into his office just off St. Peter's Square. "They come by without any appointment. You cannot say no. So it's, 'Yes, your eminence, just have a seat.' "

Nineteen years into his career as papal spokesman, Dr. Navarro-Valls, now 65, still has occasional headaches with the centuries-old papal bureaucracy, the Roman Curia.

Last year, when the Curia decided to alter the norms for reporting sexual abuse committed by priests, it neatly buried the change in a document distributed without publicity, under a cover letter in Latin.

The norms did not become generally known until a reporter for the Catholic News Service stumbled across them in a conversation with a bishop.

Why do things like this still happen?

Dr. Navarro-Valls winced.

"The Roman Curia is, historically, a very old organization," he said. "We are talking in terms of centuries. Its formal organization goes back to Sixtus V." Sixtus was a 16th-century pontiff known as the "iron pope," for creating the curial machinery essentially to crush the influence of cardinals and bishops.

The subject of sexual abuse by priests has been especially sensitive for Dr. Navarro-Valls since March.

As to how Pope John Paul II and the Vatican will react to the zero-tolerance approach to abusive priests adopted by the American bishops in Dallas, he stopped, suddenly tentative. "I am not a technician in canon law," he said, "but I think the main concern will be to reconcile the decisions approved in the United States with practices in other countries, to try to harmonize these decisions with the general canon law for the whole church, to try to see where there may be contradictions."

Dr. Navarro-Valls took up his work after a career as a physician and psychiatrist. Early on he saw religion, medicine and psychiatry as linked: religion would answer the questions that psychiatry could not. "I was fascinated at the time," he said of himself as a young man, "by those big questions, about life and death, and what makes man happy."



Sandro Michahelles for the New York Times
Mr Joaquín Navarro-Valls,
Director of the Vatican Press
Office.

In his dealings with the press, Dr. Navarro-Valls acknowledges that he finds uses for his psychiatric training. But he struggles with the question of whether to follow the suggestion that the church should "use the media."

"I hate that formulation," he said.

He sees his work as being essentially about "giving access to the process of decision-making — not just distributing pieces of paper, but in terms of explaining why."

A medical doctor and professor of psychiatry at the universities of Barcelona and Granada in his native Spain, Dr. Navarro-Valls had published freelance articles for Spanish publications when in 1977 he was asked to cover the eastern Mediterranean for the Spanish daily ABC. He worked as a journalist until 1983, and just as he had decided to return to medicine, he received an invitation to lunch at the Vatican.

It seems that Pope John Paul, then five years into his papacy, had heard praise of him from a number of people — some belonging to the secretive Catholic men's society Opus Dei, which the doctor had joined in his early 20's. Several months later, the pope invited Dr. Navarro-Valls to overhaul the Vatican press service.

"My hobby became my profession," he said, laughing. "And medicine became my hobby."

He is not shy about his own prowess. The example that pleases him most occurred at a 1994 United Nations conference in Cairo on population and development. He was a delegate, and the Vatican succeeded, thanks in part to a curious alliance with Muslim delegations, in introducing more restrictive language on abortion in the final declaration.

Dr. Navarro-Valls waved a copy of an unclassified cable relating to that conference — a message to the State Department from President Bill Clinton's ambassador to the Holy See, Raymond L. Flynn. It described the irritation of some delegates over perceived Vatican obstructionism and manipulation, but added that the "skill and tenacity" of the Vatican's diplomats "and the public affairs virtuosity of its chief spokesman — the Spaniard Joaquín Navarro-Valls, a close confidant of the pope — took many by surprise."

While working toward a medical degree in Barcelona in the 1960's, Joaquín Navarro-Valls also got a degree in communications, a field he came to from psychiatry.

"I began from the question that arises in psychiatry of how the media in general, including advertising, influence human attitudes, both for better and for worse," he said. In 1970, his first book, "Manipulation in Advertising," appeared; three others have followed, on the media, education and the family.

He traveled widely, attending seminars at Harvard, including some on international politics by Henry A. Kissinger. Talking of those years, he

described a "pilgrimage" to the London house where Freud had lived.

He is the second of five children; his father was a Cartagena lawyer. A brother is a law professor in Madrid, another is retired director of Heineken brewery's operations in Spain. He was especially close to his eldest sibling and only sister, whose death in her early 30's moved him deeply. He is still very much involved with Opus Dei, in which he now holds a senior rank that entails a commitment to celibacy.

"I took into account that the only way to find God was within the framework of my profession," he said. "I don't feel I was a Catholic physician. Instead, you are a Catholic who happens to be a physician."

Early on, the pope, whom he sees daily, assured him of access to the Vatican bureaucracy. "He opened doors," Dr. Navarro-Valls said. "Without his approach to the media, without the mentality of the pope, change would have been impossible."

He recognizes the physical handicaps of Pope John Paul, who turned 82 in May. Of his mental faculties, he said: "From the point of view of memory, or the capacity of planning for the future, those capacities are all absolutely intact. The biggest strategic decisions — now, today — are being done by the pope."

He cites the decision after Sept. 11 to convene an unusual gathering of dozens of religious leaders from Islam, Judaism and other Christian denominations to reaffirm the principle that God or religion never be invoked to justify violence. The meeting took place in January in the Italian town of Assisi.

More recently, it was the pope's decision, Dr. Navarro-Valls said, to accept the request of America's cardinals to come to Rome for two days of discussions on the priest sex abuse scandals.

Getting information from the Vatican can still be laborious (though Dr. Navarro-Valls bristles at comparisons to Kremlin secretiveness). But one example of revolutionary openness that he introduced is the pope's practice on his many travels of spending airplane time chatting with reporters in a kind of impromptu news conference. John Paul has often used such occasions to make news. On trips to Chile in 1987 and Cuba in 1998, he criticized the Pinochet and Castro dictatorships; reporters had something substantial to file on landing.

He is highly regarded by the Vatican press corps, whose members appreciate what he has achieved given the peculiarities imposed by Vatican constraints.

To this day, for example, the pope does not hold news conferences or grant interviews. In part, Dr. Navarro-Valls says, this is because so many hundreds of requests come in from news organizations around the world that saying no to everyone becomes the only effective solution.

But is it also a question of papal dignity?

In a way, yes.