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"We are called to make important things interesting"

Daniel Arasa has recently been appointed by Pope Francis as a consultant to the Dicastery for Communication in the Holy See. He speaks about his work as a professional communicator in the Church.

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The School of Communications at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome is dedicated to

training men and women who will be future communicators for the Church throughout the world. And today, among its 500 graduates are spokespersons for episcopal conferences, dioceses, and Church institutions in many countries.

In the interview below, Daniel Arasa, dean of the School of Communications and a consultant to the Holy See's Dicastery for Communication, speaks about the School's service to the Church.

The School of Communications at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross was created 25 years ago. The world of communication has changed a lot since then. And communication in the Church even more so. Could you speak a bit about this?

You're absolutely right. Things have changed a lot. To give you an example: when our School was born,

back in 1996, the number of Catholic dioceses with communication offices was very small. This is no longer the case. Currently, most dioceses or territorial structures have a communications department or someone in charge of this role.

But besides providing for these offices in places where they are still missing, the next step is to begin trying to “professionalize” the role of the Church communicator.

What do I mean by that? Up to now, in many Church institutions, the person in charge of communications has been a trusted priest or a person who has worked for a long time there and knows the diocese well. This is logical and not in itself negative. But it is no longer enough.

The world of communications and information has acquired a speed and complexity that, in order to respond appropriately, requires

specialized training. Good will is not enough. And I'm talking about an integral training: not only in specific aspects of communications such as writing techniques, good sources, knowledge of recent technologies, etc., but also in management issues (strategic communication and aspects of people management, for example), cultural formation (languages!), philosophical and theological formation....

This is what we are modestly trying to implement in our School. Some of the people who want to come and study here think that all they need is an intensive course in crisis communication and some technology courses. When I explain the full program to them, they are surprised, but they realize that they had a very limited view of the formation needed by a Church communicator in today's world.

Do you think the Church is well equipped today to communicate effectively?

It is difficult to generalize here. Much depends on economic means. But it is also clear that digitalization in general and social media in particular have changed the paradigm. You don't have to have huge budgets to reach many people effectively.

On the other hand, we need to learn from what other effective communicators are doing. We need to apply the best practices available for the Church's needs, in accord with specific conditions and circumstances.

But communication is not a skill exclusively linked to technical or economic means. It is mainly an attitude. I think the example of Pope Francis is very interesting in this regard. Constantly, in his words and

actions, it is clear how the language of welcome and mercy are convincing to men and women today. He also adds the note of joy and good humor in making the Christian life, and therefore the Church, more attractive.

In other words, the authenticity of faith, conveyed without hidden intentions, penetrates the hearts of contemporary men and women more than any slogan or marketing technique. It is the task of the local churches and their communicators to reap the fruits of the stirring of consciences that the Pope has brought about, adapting his Magisterium to particular situations.

What special skills does a Church communicator need today?

He or she needs to have a serious and deep Christian formation. Without being an expert in theology, they need to know well the

theological foundations of the Christian faith. and above all they need to personally live it in their own lives.

A second requirement is a broad cultural formation, which helps the communicator to understand the context in which the Church lives and acts. Finally, professional training in communications is needed, including technological knowledge, strategic and visual communications, etc. Certainly one cannot be an expert in every area, but one needs to know the bare minimum and be open to new knowledge and the assistance of other experts.

A good technical preparation or the ability to write and speak well is not enough. These are necessary tools, but journalism and communication in general are an art and also require creativity. As one of the professors in

our School here likes to say, we are called to make “important things interesting.” Topics about Christian life (family, vocation, eternity, faith, death...) are the most important ones because they guide and give meaning to our entire existence. But they are not always perceived as such, especially amid so much confusion and information overload today, so much fake news. Therefore, the main task of a Church communicator is to generate interest in these topics, to make them “interesting,” and this requires creativity. And creativity, besides being a talent some people are endowed with, comes especially when there is constant effort to improve, to find the right words, to think about the needs of the audience and the challenges raised by the media today.

In a world in which we are accustomed to immediate results, a Church communicator also needs to

have patience. We need to do our daily job well even if it sometimes seems fruitless. At times we complain that the media and journalists do not reflect well the reality of the Church and its activity and that they only focus on the negative aspects. Often this is true. But we must keep in mind that these media and these journalists are a reflection of the society in which we live. There are also ideological (pathological I would say) cases of attacks on the Church, but these have always existed. It seems to me that the biggest problem lies in a secularized society closed to transcendence, where everything is interpreted within an economic or political focus, which makes it very difficult to understand realities that, having an earthly dimension, are deeply supernatural.

How can we break this dynamic?
Surely there are other paths, but one

within our reach is to become, as Church communicators, reliable sources. That is, we need to be people who are really willing to help journalists do their job well by offering the information they need in the best possible way. I would like to get to the point where, when something (also negative) happens in the Church, or when the Pope makes a statement that provokes a public discussion, a journalist can call the cell phone of a Church communicator and receive a quick and clear explanation.

What role do you think the laity should play in Church communications? Do you see a need to “declericalize” religious information?

The Second Vatican Council is very clear in reminding people of the central role that lay people, women and men, play within the Church. A

first step in “declericalization” could involve incorporating more lay people in Church communications offices. And since we don’t have an overabundance of priests in the Church today, just from a practical viewpoint of available resources this makes sense.

Also, just as a bishop is advised by a lawyer or a financial expert, he should also be assisted by a communications professional, who could often be a lay person, both men and women. In fact, I am convinced of the great contribution that women, with their own special qualities, can make in all areas of communication, including the training of priests.

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