



Leadership in digital era 'Speak the Truth with Love'

I would like to begin by thanking UISG for inviting me to share some of my thoughts with you today. I hope some part of what I say over the next 20 minutes is helpful or resonates with your experience.

Maybe I should start at the beginning of my becoming involved in what we now call this digital era.

Before I do that, I would like to say that normally I use PowerPoint when I am asked to give a talk. Today I have chosen not to do this, and my reason is that I just want to talk to you Sister to Sister. I want to explain why I believe that digital communication is so vital for each of our Congregations and why I believe that it is imperative for us to utilise it to help us in our mission, in promoting vocations and to show the world that we have a part to play through our pastoral work, healthcare and education initiatives.

My Story

Maybe I should start by giving you a short history of how I became involved in what we now call this digital era, so you can see why I believe firmly in the need for us to control and manage communication about our Congregations and Sisters wherever we can in a changing media world.

In 2006 one of my ministries in the Province where I was living at the time was as the Vocations Director. There wasn't a great influx of enquiries! As I met with and shared with Vocation Directors from other congregations, I

realised that many of them were beginning to develop websites as a way of promoting vocations. Consequently, I asked for permission from my Provincial Leader to do some training in web design and development. The course I followed was assessed by each participant building a website. I thought this was a win – win situation. Not only did I get to build a website. I also learnt how a website worked so that I could post on it and update it myself.

I built the website, and I finished my studies in June of 2007. In July that year, I went to our General Chapter and to my surprise I was elected to the General Leadership Team. I had to leave my Province and go to live in Ireland. A change was ahead of me!

The good thing was that I was allowed to still manage the content and to continue posting and updating the Province website – after all the Province had made a significant financial investment in my training. Soon I was also able to put that training to good use for the wider congregation. Before long I found myself as the person on our leadership team who was responsible for communication. During the 12 years I was on the team as a councillor, the world went through and continues to go through a digital explosion. The digital era can't be ignored! We need to be prepared to engage with it – whether we want to do so or not!

Nurturing a Culture of Communications

Professor Narbona is right when he talks about the importance of managing institutional communications in the Congregation. The bottom line is that it doesn't matter what we do externally (be it on websites, social media or through the traditional media) if we don't communicate fully and regularly with our internal Congregational members, first.

It is useless if our members – and/or their families – read news about the Congregation in the media if they don't know the detail of what is behind that story in the media. Our members need to have heard the story, first, within the Congregation, so that they own the message being communicated and have their own opinion on it. They don't have to agree with it, but they do need to know all about it before the outside world hears the detail.

Congregational members matter more than anyone.

Our congregation learned that lesson when news first broke about children under our care being abused by the first two men (who were vetted and professionally qualified in childcare) and whom we employed in one of our care homes for boys. Our thinking when we employed these men was that we wanted the boys in our care to have the benefit of male adults as well as Sisters in their young lives. When, years later, the young boys grew up and made known what had happened to them, we were suddenly faced with legal cases and media publicity on a scale we couldn't imagine and couldn't control.

All we could control was how we communicated with our own Sisters, painful though it was for all of us.

We brought all our Sisters together and told them: what had happened, what would likely happen as a result of upcoming court cases and what they should expect, which was lots of negative media coverage. It was a frightening time for our Sisters. They were likely to be stopped by members of the public with whom they came in contact through their daily work. It was the right thing to do to arm each Sister with information and once we started to do it, in an organized and deliberate way, we saw the benefits and realised this is what we need to do with all our news - bad or good.

The Ryan Report

A significant factor in all of this and in my personal development in understanding the role of and importance of communication is what I experienced when I moved to Ireland. I am sure most people here are aware of what the Church in Ireland has been through for the past 14 years since the publication in 2009 of the Ryan Report.

The Ryan Report was a damning indictment of Religious who had an involvement in managing industrial schools and chronicled stories of abuse ranging over seventy years. Understandably, it caused outrage and disgust, releasing torrents of media and other condemnation morning, noon and night, for days and weeks on end.

Many of the criticisms were warranted and could not be denied. Regrettably, Gospel values had not prevailed in some schools and in the treatment of children.

The days and weeks following the Report brought unprecedented turmoil and distress for all concerned.

Religious were subjected to sustained condemnation within news bulletins, chat shows, newspapers. The attack was unrelenting from media, advocacy groups, and even from political and Church leaders.

We hoped in vain for a voice of reason to emerge and to invite some balance and context while not diminishing the hurt that had been caused. The Report was taken as totally reflective of all Religious. The Prime Minister of the day lectured us in the public media and told us we would be judged in the court of public opinion.

The effect that this had on the Religious in Ireland was devastating. Everyone was left in a state of shock and total bewilderment that there was such a toxic, vitriolic and damning opinion of religious congregations. Past histories of the great founders of our religious congregations who stepped in to alleviate poverty and provide schools, hospitals and welfare services during times when the governments could not afford to do so, meant nothing.

I was a member of one of the congregations involved in this and I observed that most congregations like ours were deeply distrustful of anyone from the media. All we wanted to see was some balance in the reporting – but nobody wanted to know. And so we, at this time, said nothing!

However, there was something in me that kept saying “This is only one side of the story. There is still so much good work being done by so many Congregations. There must be another way to tell those stories.”

Then just by chance I received information about a conference that was being organised by CWR – Communicators for Women Religious in the United States.

Telling our Stories

In 2010 I went to my first CWR Conference. The conference was in the United States and one of the first things I noticed was that I was no longer in a toxic anti-religious environment. Here were mainly lay people who worked for religious congregations. Although the US church had been through its own share of stories of abuse and cover-ups by clergy and religious, there

was a tolerance for balance – and this was a turning point for me. I saw that there was another way and that somehow my own and other congregations could learn from this.

The way forward was in telling stories.

We could learn and look for ways to tell the other stories – the Good News stories that witness to our individual charisms....

Stories which would show the many and varied ministries in which we are involved.

Stories about our efforts to alleviate the poverty and suffering of humankind and our planet.

Stories that show that religious congregations have moved with the times, are collaborating with each other, and are continuing to advocate for those most in need in our world today.

Last Sunday we celebrated World Communications Day. The theme for this year was - Speaking with the heart - “The truth in love” (Eph 4:15)

In his message for this day, Pope Francis tells us that:

In a historical period marked by polarizations and contrasts ... the commitment to communicating “with open heart and arms” does not pertain exclusively to those in the field of communications; it is everyone’s responsibility. We are all called to seek and to speak the truth and to do so with charity.¹ End quote.

I believe that this call is for each one of us Sisters in our role as leaders within our Congregations. I have come to believe with a passion that we MUST communicate with the world through whatever means possible.

Having experienced all the negative effects as I explained earlier, I have seen and have come to believe in the positive effects that digital communication can have. A part of that is being brave enough to tell our Sisters’ stories.

¹<https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/20230124-messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html#:~:text=After%20having%20reflected%20in%20Opast%20speaking%20with%20the%20heart>”.

Our generation has a special responsibility to tell our story widely. Our Congregations are ageing fast in some parts of the world. We are no longer visible in our communities the way we used to be. If we don't make every effort to communicate the work, we and those who went before us, spent our life on, the worth of those ministries will not be recognised or understood.

There are of course some things that we need to be wary of which I think are worth noting. The first is that we need to educate and encourage our Sisters to post responsibly on their own social media platforms. Many of our Sisters will have Facebook pages, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok accounts and some may be bloggers or vloggers.

Then of course there may be Sisters who go 'rogue' and without telling anyone they are giving interviews and before you know it, you are reading about the congregation in the media without any knowledge that it was going to happen or without any reference to our communications people who would have helped the Sisters to prepare for such an interview.

To help avoid these pitfalls, I believe it is very important to have a Communications Policy for the Congregation which sets out guidelines reminding Sisters that when they post on these different platforms or speak to the media they are always representing the Congregation and therefore we should be mindful that they should always 'Communicate the truth in love' and not post anything that will be hurtful to another person.

In my own congregation I have seen how the involvement of our sisters telling their stories on TV has been a source of good.

In Zambia, our sisters have been interviewed on the TV many times advocating for people who are being trafficked both internally and internationally.

The same is true in Nigeria where the radio stations have interviewed our sisters about their anti-human trafficking work.

This type of exposure reaches hundreds of thousands of people and shows the human face of religious as well as the importance of our mission and ministries. You all have similar stories - I urge you to identify them and find a way to tell them - through your website or digital media.

Get Advice if you need it!

We do not have a salaried Communications Director on our staff, but we do work with a Communications company. They have been invaluable to us when we have needed to 'firefight' negative stories in the media.

An important role for them has been to correct inaccuracies in digital news outlets and to seek to insert our truth into articles. Keeping the record straight is very important in the digital world - if a news report is factually inaccurate that will, over time, be seen as fact and carried on to other media. So correcting inaccuracies is crucial.

However, when the negative stories have subsided, we then have a chance to work together and discover and promote our good stories. The communications company has a team of three, dedicated to working with our congregation. Normally, I meet with them once every three weeks. We look at our communications calendar and plan what needs to be looked at now and what stories might emerge in the coming weeks. What I like about our 'team of three' is that they are an extended part of my team but are objective. One is a very experienced communications director and the other two are young women who challenge me to look at a bigger picture. They can discern what might be an interesting story. Such a story might be one that would never have occurred to me.

It is interesting to note that in recent years most of the enquiries we have from women who are seeking to discern their vocation, have come to us through Facebook.

Using our Websites

Most of us have websites.

So a question I would have for us as leaders in our Congregations is How often do we reflect on the impact our website is having?
How often do we look at the website and gauge how it is serving the Congregation?

We recently modernised our website to refresh the Congregation's online presence. We know that if anyone puts our name into Google our site comes up - it can be the first impression of our Congregation, or a resource for those wanting to know more about us.

Your website is totally within your control as a window into your Congregation. So, I would encourage you look at your website and assess if your site is working for you - does it tell your story and if it doesn't then start analysing what you can do to improve it.

Another question I offer for your reflection is: if we have dedicated or employed Communicators, how do we help them in their work – do we encourage them and help them find the stories we need to tell – or do they need to squeeze the stories out of us because we don't like to “boast” about what we are doing!!!

Conclusion

As I come towards the end of my presentation, I would just like to share a Good News story from Ireland that has international implications.

Last month the national television broadcaster RTE shared a very good news story and I would like to share it with you:

<https://twitter.com/rtenews/status/1651287787390349313?s=46&t=g0rfMkhov9L-o93DYKTVZg>

As you can see the story was about one congregation – The Holy Rosary Sisters. However, I can assure you that many congregations in Ireland were celebrating when we saw this. Never would we have imagined that a story like this would have been part of a national news broadcast on primetime television.

Sisters...

We need to tell our stories to show that religious are still relevant and active in the world...

We need to tell our stories to honour the work and value of the religious who came before us...

We need to tell our stories to show that religious are in a unique position to read the signs of the times and continue to start initiatives that help those who are made poor and enable them to lift themselves out of poverty...

We need to tell our stories to encourage young women to come and join us...

But most of all...

We need to tell our stories to be a witness to Gospel values in our world today.

Evangelization and communication cannot be separated. If we do not have a digital presence and tell our stories, then others will tell them for us. When this happens, we have no control over how we are represented and very often the truth is not told.

Finally, I would like to leave the last word to Pope Francis and quote again from his message for World Communications Day. He says:

*I dream of an ecclesial communication
which puts the relationship with God and one's neighbour, especially the neediest, at the centre and which knows how to light the fire of faith rather than preserve the ashes of a self-referential identity.*

A form of communication founded on humility in listening and [boldness] in speaking, which never separates truth from charity.

May the Lord Jesus, the pure Word poured out from the heart of the Father, help us to make our communication clear, open and heartfelt.

May the Lord Jesus, the Word made flesh, help us listen to the beating of hearts, to rediscover ourselves as brothers and sisters, and to disarm the hostility that divides.

May the Lord Jesus, the Word of truth and love, help us speak the truth in charity, so that we may feel like protectors of one another.²

AMEN!

Sr. Patricia Lenihan, Superior General
of the Religious Sisters of Charity

² ibid