A Church in Dialogue

The Art and Science
of Church Communication

25 years at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross
Gema Bellido (ed)

A CHURCH IN DIALOGUE: THE ART AND SCIENCE OF CHURCH COMMUNICATION

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Chapter 15

THE DYNAMICS AND CONTEXT OF PROBLEMS IN INSTITUTIONAL TRUST[1]

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Any summary of the communication of the Catholic Church in the past quarter-century would remain incomplete without mentioning the crisis of trust linked to the scandals of sexual abuse. The Church's communication of this crisis has had, and continues to have, an impact on whether people see it as credible, as worthy of trust, or not.

Before we discuss trust and trustworthiness in the specific context of the Catholic Church, it is worth defining our terms – saying what we mean by "trust" – and then contextualising the debate in wider terms.

For a definition of trust, I like to quote Russell Hardin, an American Political Scientist who was one of the foremost thinkers on trust. He passed away in 2017 aged 76, having written extensively on trust, distrust and trustworthiness. His book *Trust* is full of key concepts. In this excellent and widely cited book he states:

> To say that I trust you in some context is to say that I think you are or will be trustworthy towards me in that context. You might not be trustworthy towards others and you might not be trustworthy towards me in other contexts. If we

> think trust is declining, therefore, we must suppose that trustworthiness, or at least perceived trustworthiness, is declining. The value of trustworthiness is that it makes social cooperation easier and even possible, so that its decline would entail losses of cooperativeness. Most of the voluminous literature on declining trust sees it as a major problem independently of any account of trustworthiness – but surely if there is a problem here it is with trustworthiness.[2]

I find this opening paragraph very helpful in three ways in particular. First it anchors trust as an essential piece of human architecture: without trust, it becomes much more difficult for us to cooperate, interact and transact with others.

Second, it establishes that trust is an outcome, something that is earned from trustworthy behaviour. I particularly like this last point because it makes it clear that restoring trust should not be an objective in itself. Individuals and institutions should instead adopt a set of behaviours and actions designed to demonstrate that they are worthy of trust. The outcome of behaving in such a trustworthy manner will be greater trust.

And third, it introduces the idea that sometimes we are guilty of trusting too much – trusting when the institution or organisation concerned does not deserve that trust. This is particularly the case when it comes to high status institutions such as – I would argue – the ratings agencies in the financial crisis, or indeed the Catholic Church in respect of the clergy sex abuse scandal or the recent allegations of corruption regarding the Holy See's Investments.

But again, before discussing what has happened to trust in the Catholic Church, let us take a look at what has happened in the wider context of rapid change in all of society. There we see that the arrival of hyper-connected societies – powered by broadband availability and social media – has changed the dynamics of who we trust.

Trust, until recently, was anchored by two distinct factors – proximity and status. In local communities, personal ties and tight closed networks formed the architecture of trust. Proximity to your neighbour produced close knit networks where trust could easily be ascertained. The emergence of tribal leaders, of monarchs, and of global institutions created a new architecture anchored not just on proximity but also on status. Trust in this world was conferred to a large extent by your

[2] Russell Hardin, *Trust* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006), 1.

accepted place in a hierarchy, irrespective of how well (or not) you personally knew those who you were being asked to trust. You were trusted because or your position in society, which was believed to be conferred as a mark of having earned such trust. The Governor of the Bank of England was, for example, trusted simply because he was the Governor of the Bank of England.

This system of trust dominated societal relations until the start of this millennium. And then things changed.

With broadband, we were for the first time exposed to dramatically more information on everything and everyone, at speed, and basically for free. And with social media, we could gather and share that information at will. What is emerging now is a society where we tend not to automatically trust those with high status, but rather prefer to trust those who we feel best represent or understand us. If you like, trust has moved from the hierarchical to the horizontal. The best example of this is Trip Advisor. If you are trying to establish whether a certain hotel or restaurant is worth visiting, users of the site have been found to trust reviews from those who they feel are 'similar' to them – other users – rather than accept the word of the owner of the restaurant.

This shift has had fundamental consequences for large and systemically important global institutions such as the Catholic Church. No longer can the institution rely on being trusted simply because of its status. It has to earn its trust – or be trustworthy – through different means. And fundamental to that is this notion of democratised trust – trust that is earned by connecting with and within members of a much wider section of the global communities that surround us.

Trust within the context of the Catholic Church rests generally on perceived behaviours exhibited over millennia. However, in more recent times, trust has also come to rest on the specific nature of perceived behaviours relating to two major scandals that have resulted in the distrust that surrounds certain aspects of the Catholic Church today. In this respect, it is helpful to distinguish between trust and reputations, identifying the specific drivers and dimensions of both.

Trust is most commonly defined as a "firm belief in the reliability, truth, or ability of someone or something." Trust has today become a major area of scholarship and research. Perhaps the most important recent advance in the theoretical work came with the publication,

in 1995, of a paper entitled "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust" published in the Academy of Management Review by Roger Mayer and James Davis of the University of Notre Dame and David Schoorman of Purdue University.[3] In this paper, the authors set out three principal drivers of trust – ability, benevolence, and integrity – what scholars now refer to as the "ABI of trust."

Reputation by contrast is most commonly defined as "the beliefs or opinions that are generally held about someone or something." You can see that in this respect, reputation and trust are clearly different concepts – trust being altogether a more absolute and certain concept, with reputation being something which unites opinions around particular dimensions of social evaluation. But while these two terms are of course distinct in important ways, they also share some common ground.

First, the drivers of trust – ability, benevolence and integrity – are echoed in what I have described in my recent book *The Reputation Game* (co-authored with the late and great David Waller)[4] as the Janus Face of Reputation. During the last ten years of my work, it has become clear to me that it is the dual dimensions of perceptions of capability and perceptions of character that underpin the reputations we ascribe to others. It is therefore easy to align trust's 'ability' with reputation's 'capability,' and trust's 'benevolence and Integrity' with reputation's 'character.'

Second, both concepts lend themselves to the idea that we can evaluate others – both individuals and institutions – through multiple lenses. We may have many different reputations for something, with someone; and we may be trusted to do many different things by different people.

This brings us back to the central question of how trust can be attained and retained in uncertain contexts. Scandals produce acute levels of uncertainty. Often the core information circulating on a scandal become highly contested. Views surrounding the same 'facts' often differ significantly depending on the audience group. In addition, micro-communities of activists regularly compete to use scandal in pursuit of different campaigning agendas and objectives. All of this muddies

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[3] Roger C. Mayer, James H. Davis, and F. David Schoorman, 'An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust,' *The Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (July 1995): 709-734, https://www.jstor.org/stable/258792.

[4] David Waller and Rupert Younger, *The Reputation Game, The Art of Changing How People See You* (London: OneWorld Publications, 2017).

the waters when it comes to trust, adding confusion and complexity that works to undermine trust in institutions and their leaders.

Different scandals deploy in different ways, with different dimensions of reputation and trust assuming primacy at different points. We can perhaps ascribe the recent financial mismanagement scandal to perceptions of capability, where the systems and oversight and controls were not robust or expert enough to prevent corruption and abuse. By contrast, the clergy sex abuse scandal – and in particular the sustained cover up that accompanied this over so many years – speaks more directly to perceptions of poor character.

Georges Cottier, writing in a piece published on the Holy See website in 2000 states that "in Biblical language, scandal signifies a trap, that which causes a fall, therefore something which causes one to falter, which endangers faith."[5]

I, like many others, would argue that it is the clergy sex abuse scandal that has been the biggest scandal impacting trust in the Catholic Church in recent decades. In his *Homiliarum in Ezechielem*, Pope Gregory I – more commonly referred to as Gregory the Great – declared that "as much as we can, without sin, we ought to avoid scandal to our neighbours. But if scandal is taken from truth, it is better that scandal be allowed to arise than that truth be relinquished."

The central trust issue dogging the Catholic Church is that it has seemed to prioritise the avoidance of scandal in an attempt to preserve the reputation of the Catholic Church as a whole at the expense of protection of those most at risk of harm from the scandal. This attaches itself to a direct criticism of the character of the Catholic Church. One of the earliest archdiocesan reports on clergy sex abuse, the 1990 Winter report from St. John's Newfoundland, found that the "traditional cultural and ecclesiastical concern for avoiding the spread of scandal is based on the view that if people see their leaders and those they admire doing evil things, the tendency will be 'to stumble' either by direct imitation of those evil actions or by being shocked into turning away from the good that may be associated even with those

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[5] Georges Cottier, 'Counter-witness and Scandal,' *Tertium Millenium* no. 2 (June/September 1996), para. 3, https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/magazine/documents/ju_mag_june-sept-1996_cottier_en.html.

who do evil."[6] This idea – that the reputation of the Church is a greater good that should be protected even has roots back in the scriptures. Romans 14:13, states "let us not therefore judge one another anymore. But judge this rather, that you put not a stumbling block or a scandal in your brother's way."[7]

This command – to avoid scandal at all costs – manifested itself in several damaging ways when it comes to trust in the institution of the Catholic Church. According to Robert Bennett (et al) in their report on the crisis in the United States prepared by the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People First, "church leaders kept information from parishioners and other dioceses that should have been provided to them. Some also pressured victims not to inform the authorities or the public of abuse.…Bishops and other Church leaders often did not tell their brethren the full story when a priest took up residence in a new diocese.… This lack of candor – with parishioners, with civil authorities, with fellow bishops – avoided scandal in the short term while sowing seeds for greater upheaval in the long term."[8]

When considering reputation and trust, it is important to anchor our discussion around expectations and norms. Catholicism is anchored on the idea of the protection of individuals, the idea that we can and are all equally valued children of God and that we all have a place in the Kingdom of Heaven. Underpinning this is the assumption that the Catholic Church is a place of refuge, compassion, forgiveness, and redemption. When the Catholic Church or its leaders violate these norms, trust suffers.

Charity, inclusion and concern for all including the marginalised and the dispossessed was a key feature of the very first Christian communities. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, had a special responsibility for the daily distribution of alms to widows and orphans

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[6] Gordon Winter et al., *Report of the Archdiocesan Commission of Enquiry into the Sexual Abuse of Children by members of the clergy of the Archdiocese*, Vol. 1 (St. John's, Newfoundland: Archdiocese of Newfoundland, 1990), 112, http://bishop-accountability.org reports/1990_06_Winter_St_Johns/1990_Winter_Volume_1.pdf.

[7] Douay-Rheims translation.

[8] Robert S. Bennett et al., *A Report on the Crisis in the Catholic Church in the United States prepared by the National Review Board for the Protection of Children and Young People* (Washington DC: USCCB, 2004), 108.

(Acts 6:1-3), reflecting the commitment of the Church to charity and service advocated in the gospels. The first churches, diverse in practice and belief, exhibited a radical openness to mutuality, parity, and inclusion. Indeed, the origin of the word 'church' lies in the Greek word *Ekklesia* which means the 'assembly of the people.' In these *Ekklesia*, women were admitted as were slaves,[9] children, foreigners, and other visitors. From its earliest incarnations, the Catholic Church embraced diversity and eschewed discrimination on grounds of race, class, or gender.

This became the calling card of the early Christian ministries. All were welcome, people were treated with care and attentiveness, provided with nutritional and spiritual nourishment, and given voice. These built a trust in the character of the Catholic Church that proved immensely powerful when set against the everyday experienced norms of (often) brutal state intervention, feudal abuse, criminality or abject poverty arising from the economic cycles of the time.

The early Catholic Church was therefore anchored in a strong commitment to what we would today call strong institutional *character*. The Edict of Milan in AD 313 was an agreement between the Emperors Licinius and Constantine which recognised the legal personality of churches, and which committed to treat all religions equally and to restore lands and property confiscated under persecution.

The Edict of Milan provided a framework that was to influence much of Europe as it embraced Christianity. It was a powerful demonstration of the essentially good character of Christianity. It explicitly linked civic governance, religion, and the economy together in the interests of creating wider social norms that benefitted individuals and communities, such as the prohibition on usury. The ties that were created between communities and their churches became very powerful, building local trust ecosystems of huge importance and cohesion. In England, for example, parish churches became anchors of community life, trusted places where moral welfare, social improvement, and pastoral provision were all to be found.

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[9] See Paul's Letter to Philemon.

It is within this idea of community that trust in the Church was to be found. And at the heart of this trust was dialogue and communication – between clergy and parishioner, and within the wider ecosystems that surrounded the church as the epicentre of village or local community life. Community and communication brought people together in the important task of spreading the word of God, strengthening ties and trust through open dialogue and discussion. Good communication, then, also has deep roots as a building block for trustworthiness – and its eventual outcome, trust.

Dialogue and discussion are today central planks within the DNA of the Catholic Church. So too are the concepts of openness and transparency. Christians believe that there are a set of values, a faith, that have to be passed to the next generations. However, the path is not always smooth. Within this, Christians can stray from a righteous path which, when it happens, requires repentance and conversion. Sin, abuse scandals, and financial mismanagements are all part of daily human experience and existence within the Catholic Church, with transparent communications requiring absolute coherence between what is said and what is done in repentance order to repair the trust damage that occurs.

This is of course the case in all parts of society, and over millennia. Trust has always required the stated word to match the actual deed. But while earlier generations required this at local levels, today's information superhighways, the polarisation of civic discourse, the sensationalism of social media and the press, and activism within micro communities relies on the emergence of a new socially constructed set of norms around hyper-transparency, deep fairness, and an acceptance of our global interdependence. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the current vaccine crisis. Globalism has in many senses hyper-activated localism – burnishing or tainting communities and churches through attachment to the wider context.

So, what should the Catholic Church be doing to restore trust in these uncertain contexts? Two eminent management scholars – Nicole Gillespie from the University of Queensland and Graham Dietz, now sadly departed but previously on faculty at Durham University in the UK – offer a four-stage model for trust repair for institutions and organisations. I really like this model and will use it to frame my remarks on the ways in which I believe the Catholic Church is, or should be, continuing to rebuild trust.

The first stage is captured in how the Church immediately responds to scandals. The authors note that it is important to "acknowledge the incident, express regret, announce a full investigation, and commit resources to prevent a reoccurrence." The Catholic Church certainly failed in this first stage when it comes to the historic clergy sex abuse scandal, although there are signs that it is starting to learn from the more recent scandal relating to corruption in the Vatican's financial affairs.

As the Catholic Church initially saw it, an apology would be even worse than the sexual sins committed by its clergy as to do so would present a stumbling block ("skandalon" in Greek) to the faith of believers. Thus, a strategy of secrecy to the point of cover-up could be seen not as a bad strategy, but as a positive imperative, a contribution to the greater good.

Chicago Law School Professor Mary Anne Case follows this up in her paper on abuse in the Catholic Church, stating that as it quickly became clear that this approach was not working, a revisionist approach took hold, whereby the avoidance of scandal required not secrecy, but rather openness and disclosure. She says:

> After decades of being told it was their duty to keep silent, sex abuse survivors finally heard Pope Francis say to his bishops in 2015 that "the crimes and sins of sexual abuse of minors cannot be kept secret any longer" and heard him acknowledge that the Church "owe[s] each of [the survivors of abuse] and their families our gratitude for their immense courage in making Christ's light to shine upon the evil of sexual abuse of children."[10] Nearly three years later, in a June 5, 2018 letter to the Chilean people, [Pope] Francis spoke for the first time and repeatedly of "a culture of abuse and cover up" and acknowledged with "shame … that we did not know how to listen and react in time."[11] He declared it "urgent to create spaces where the culture of abuse and cover up is not the dominant scheme, where a critical and questioning attitude is not confused with betrayal" and

[10] See Francis J. McElwee, 'For only the second time, Francis meets abuse survivors, says "God weeps,"' *Crux*, 27 September 2015, https://www.ncronline.org/news/vatican/only-second-time-francis-meets-abuse-survivors-says-god-weeps. These off-the-cuff remarks to bishops came immediately after Francis's second meeting ever, more than two years into his papacy, with abuse survivors.

[11] Francis, 'Letter of Francis to the Pilgrim People of God in Chile,' 5 June 2018, translated by the Catholic News Agency, https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/full-text-of-pope-francis-letter-to-the-church-in-chile-35580.

to "promote communities capable of fighting against abusive situations, communities where exchanges, debate and confrontation are welcome. [12]

The second stage in the Gillespie and Dietz model is *diagnosis*, which they state should be "accurate, timely and transparent." It seems clear that the initial response of the Catholic Church to the clergy sex abuse scandal was deeply inadequate in this respect. Much of this inadequacy came from a series of earlier Canon Law Edicts which can be grouped together under the term 'pontifical secrecy,' the first being the *Crimen Sollicitationis* in 1922 which itself was so secret that it was locked away in the papal archives for the internal use of the curia only, and which bound all involved in proceedings dealing with allegations of sexual abuse to permanent silence. Pope Paul VI expanded this requirement of secrecy to the allegation itself as well as the proceedings. It was only in 2010 that this was relaxed a little to allow reporting of such allegations to the police.

Furthermore, it seems that historically the diagnosis of allegations relating to clergy sexual abuse favoured leniency and forgiveness over action and accountability. Unlike in non-ecclesiastical cases, where sex offenders were placed on registers, monitored and often removed from positions where they had the ready ability to repeat offend, the clergy seemed to be given a light warning and either left to return to their diocese or simply moved to another where their past could be erased. Accurate, timely and transparent diagnosis this was not.

The third step in the model is what Gillespie and Dietz describe as reforming interventions. These, according to the authors, should take two forms – first, *verbal apologies* that connect directly to what they have found themselves to be culpable of; and second, *actions* that address directly the findings from the diagnosis. In more recent times, it seems that the Catholic Church is learning to do this stage better. Pope Francis issued a formal written apology in August 2018, accepting blame for both the abuse and the cover up that took place, stating that "we showed no care for the little ones; we abandoned them." And he has also shown similar grit in confronting the financial scandal with a clear agenda to reform the Vatican's administration. This has involved proactive information raids on Vatican offices from 2019 onwards and then, in late December last year, ordering the Vatican's powerful Secretariat of State to transfer all its financial

[12] Mary Anne Case, 'Institutional Responses to #MeToo Claims: #VaticanToo, #KavanaughToo, and the Stumbling Block of Scandal,' *University of Chicago Legal Forum* (2019): 3.

holdings to another office, the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See.

The final step in the model refers to *evaluation*, which once again the authors state needs to be both accurate as well as timely and transparent. The point here, as it relates to trust and trustworthiness, is that the institution needs to demonstrate that it is intent on learning from the mistakes of the past, and that it is actively alive to the resurgence of any such bad behaviour again in the future. One of the most high-profile successes in the evaluation stage of the model relates to how BP evaluated – and continues to evaluate – the lessons learn from the Macondo tragedy in April 2010 which cost the lives of 11 people on board the Deepwater Horizon exploration rig in the Gulf of Mexico. I am unclear about the extent to which the Catholic Church will continue to evaluate itself, although I note the stream of reports and discussions that have emerged on issues relating to the behaviour of individuals and dioceses over time which would indicate high levels of self-evaluation. This is all for the good, when it comes to trust, especially when it is combined with the approach to transparency and openness that has come to define the recent past.

So, let me finish where I started. Trust is an outcome, relying on people accepting demonstrations of trustworthiness. These demonstrations need to address issues relating to perceptions arising from institutional capability as well as institutional character. Trusted institutions are those that demonstrate a high level of expertise, capability and professionalism when it comes to the way they operate, as well as those who adhere to stated and pro-social character commitments. In this respect, the Catholic Church is able to draw on a large history of purpose-led behaviours as well as a demonstrated care for the physical needs and spiritual welfare of the individual. Many institutions have a lot of work to do to reconnect with their true purpose, often because that original purpose has either been obscured through the years or that the business has changed to the point that there is a need for a purpose refresh. While it has faced a number of deep and systemic challenges to the trust placed in it, the Catholic Church can draw on a deep and profound sense of purpose that has remained a bright north star for over two millennia. It is this that provides a bedrock of trustworthiness on which it continues to draw today.

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