

AUSTEN IVEREIGH

Voices in the wilderness

The Catholic Church in Britain was at the centre of a media frenzy when Pope Benedict criticised recent equality legislation. Such interest will be at least as intense in the run-up to the Pope's visit in September. But by then a new Catholic group says it will be ready to meet the onslaught

The phones, mostly, are silent; but when they go off, they all ring at once. The news spotlight seldom touches Catholics for long. But there are mainly two moments when the Church and its beliefs suddenly move to the centre of the national conversation: when they are the subject or object of a major news story, and when pressure is applied to a neuralgic point of clashing beliefs and values. Neuralgic points are those places on the body which, when pressed, cause people to squeal.

The death of Pope John Paul II and the election of his successor in 2005 were examples of the first, creating a tremendous media demand to know what Catholics were like, what they thought and were going through.

The release in November last year of the devastating Murphy report into the cover-up of abuse in Dublin Archdiocese, and last week's Irish bishops' summit with Pope Benedict, were another example: the Church itself is at the centre of the story.

The spotlight becomes particularly fierce when a news story also carries with it a number of neuralgic issues, when the Church's attitudes seem strongly at variance with public opinion. Pope Benedict XVI's recent address to English and Welsh bishops is an example of such a moment. A papal address in Rome to bishops at the end of their five-yearly *ad limina* is, in itself, barely news, but it became so for three reasons. First, it appeared, or rather was made to appear, that the Pope was

interfering in British parliamentary processes. Secondly, he was made to appear in favour of discrimination against gay people. Thirdly, he seemed to be attempting to impose a Catholic view of sexuality on British society. None of these was true. But because they touched on neuralgic issues – political sovereignty, equality versus rights of religion – the story took on a life of its own.

Very occasionally, like an eclipse, a major news event brings a set of neuralgic issues in its train, and the two kinds of "media moment" coincide. That's when pages of newspapers are cleared, and the studios rifle through their contact lists. The visit of Pope Benedict XVI to Britain in September – on an itinerary likely to include being received by Her Majesty at Holyrood, and addresses to Parliament and in Westminster Abbey – is one of these "eclipse" moments, and a magnificent opportunity for communicating Catholicism.

Fleeing the spotlight is not an option. "Continue to insist upon your right to participate in national debate through respectful dialogue with other elements in society," Pope Benedict told the bishops of England and Wales. "In doing so, you are not only maintaining long-standing British traditions of freedom of expression and honest exchange of opinion, but you are actually giving voice to the convictions of many people who lack the means to express them".

Come September, there will be studio chairs waiting to be filled; to fail to do so is to abrogate our right to be heard. This is a job, of course, for the Church's communications office, and the bishops. But it is primarily a task for lay Catholics with jobs and families, who are also active parishioners and members of church organisations and movements. Only they can have the flexibility and availability that a 24-hour news culture demands.

Hence Catholic Voices, a project to brief and train a team of "ordinary" Catholics – almost all lay, mostly under 40 (to counter-balance the current crop of public Catholics), men and women in a variety of states of life – to be available to the media in the run-up to and during Benedict XVI's visit. The model is inspired by the experience of the "Da Vinci Code Response Group" in 2006, when the release of the Dan Brown film created a similar demand for Catholics to be ready to discuss its claims, however far-fetched.

Openness, transparency, accountability, a readiness to explain, a familiarity with the



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Under the Vocations tab on the Home Page you will find two programmes called *Quest* and *Threshold* which we run for women seeking direction in their lives. For those who are involved in vocational discernment, here is a way and a place! These happen on our Guest Wing at the Convent. For more on the Guest Wing and what it offers, visit the website.

During Holy Week this year we will be providing discussion and teaching on this great Liturgy as you experience it with us.

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idiom of the media and a strategic understanding of the constraints and pressures of the modern news industry – these are all part of the communications culture that Catholic Voices seeks to impart between March and September, through weekend media skills training, and twice-monthly “briefings” examining issues likely to come under the spotlight.

The briefings – when our team of speakers (we’re selecting 25 from more than 80 applicants) will grill experts – are designed to get inside each neuralgic issue and work out why the squealing occurs. It may be because there is a perception, real or exaggerated, that the Church’s positions are simply unacceptable – the idea that Aids should not be fought with condoms, for example; or that homosexuality is a “disordered” tendency. In which case, we need to understand (and communicate) the fullness of that teaching, and explain it within universal moral categories (natural law).

But, more often, neuralgic issues exist because of a perception that the Church is trying to coerce or impose, demanding a privileged position in law – either through an exemption (the right to refuse homosexual couples the chance to adopt children) or a privilege (to select mostly Catholic pupils for Catholic schools) – while receiving public money. Secularisation means that a Christian-informed cultural norm can no longer be defended solely because it is good or right, and even less because it is part of our “Christian tradition” (an increasingly fateful argument). It must be argued on its merits, in the language of interests and rights and social goods, in an increasingly chilly environment.

It is not militant atheism or Peter Tatchell’s “Protest the Pope” campaign that are the major foes. If anything, they do Catholics a favour by creating stories that give us a chance to respond. The real foe is a half-baked humanism. Responding to it requires being strategic and intelligent: to understand that behind every critical challenge to the Church lurks a positive intention – to be free of pain (assisted death law), to be treated equally (against discrimination), to value life (Aids and condoms). So we also need to know how to point to genuine solutions that are not self-defeating or creating further problems.

It has been gratifying, and moving, to receive so many applications from people who care passionately that the Church is not, at the moment, being heard as it should; and who are willing to act on that frustration, receive intensive training and offer themselves at a moment’s notice to TV and radio studios.

These new Catholic communicators are gentle, reasoned and intelligent. They are ready to intervene early to doctor the spin and tell the truth. When the phones start ringing, theirs is the honourable task – a vocation, even – of being a Catholic Voice.

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MARGARET HEBBLETHWAITE

‘I hope Paraguay will be proud of these young people, who are so proud of their country’



February is always an exciting time of year because it is when I finalise which new students will receive scholarships from the Santa Maria Education Fund before the academic year. There is a particular thrill in discovering new people of intelligence, many of whom I have never met before. One of these is Laura – a delightful little person with a lot of bounce. She looks less than her 18 years, but when she tells her story, you sense a depth of maturity. In fact, she is getting married in a week’s time.

Laura comes from a *compañía* called San Antonio, which is one of the furthest outposts in the municipality. Her life has been shaped by her love for her father, who is no longer alive but who still exercises a deep influence on her. He used to work as a farm labourer, until he had a terrible accident when she was still a young child. He had climbed up on the back of a tractor to clean the blades of the machine that ploughed the earth. His workmate either did not hear or did not attend to what he had said he was doing, for he turned the engine on, making the blades whirr round and cut deep into the other’s body. Laura’s father was left with missing bits of flesh, covered over with loose skin. He could never work again.

When Laura was in primary school, her father spoke to her solemnly about her less than perfect marks. “I will never now be able to pay for further education for you,” he said. “To stand any chance of getting a scholarship, you will have to study really hard and get nothing less than the top mark in every subject, every year. Alternatively, you can relax now, but know that there will be no further education for you later on. The choice is yours.” Laura thought about it overnight and went back to her father: “I have decided to go all out for the top marks,” she said.

The next year, her father was taken ill, after he had gone out in the blazing sun against doctor’s orders to attend to an emergency in his field. As he was taken by ambulance to hospital in Asunción, he asked for

Laura’s forgiveness. “Why?” she asked. “Because now the little money I had saved up to buy you a moped, so you could go to secondary school in Santa María, will be spent on my ambulance and my treatment.” “Never mind, it is better for me to miss a year of secondary school than for you to be unable to go to hospital,” said Laura. He never returned home.

Six years later when she left school, Laura did indeed get the top marks. She wants to study social work, so she can help other people in need, and she is in a good position to get a state scholarship. But even when this is confirmed, it will only cover her fees, with nothing left over to cover her fares or study materials. The Santa María Education Fund (www.santamariadefeo.org) will pay the balance, and advance the university costs until the state scholarship comes through.

Laura was one of the clear-cut cases for help, but to allocate resources justly among other applicants with good marks, from deep in the *campo*, we held an exam. The exams are on my desk now, and I am enthused as I read them. The essay question was suggested to me by a visitor to the Santa María Hotel, who likes to ask young people what they are most proud of in their country.

“In my country, people are simple and kind, and they receive a stranger as a family member, with open arms and without any kind of discrimination,” wrote one. “Another of the great values the Paraguayan has is the typical Guaraní greeting ‘*Mba’eichapa?*’ (‘How are you?’) to which you always reply ‘Very well’, even when things are bad.”

“Paraguay is the only bilingual country where two languages are spoken,” said another. “We speak Spanish and our beloved Guaraní, in honour of our ancestors who defended our country with their lives.”

Another answer was: “Paraguayan dance and the polka make you happy and fill you with joy, at the patronal feast days held in the countryside.” And another: “My country still has much of what God has left us: trees which give fruit and shade, where we can hear the song of the birds and the insects; beautiful fields where the animals find pasture; a lot of land to cultivate, hills and streams to enjoy, and pure air to breathe.”

I hope that Paraguay will have reason in due course to be proud of these young people, who are now so proud of their country.