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Weathering the storm: Hauser's *Vernacular Voices*, public relations and the Roman Catholic Church's sexual abuse scandal

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Abstract

Since 2002, the Roman Catholic sexual abuse scandal has had disastrous and far-reaching effects on both the church's ability to interact with its internal publics and its ability to pursue its public agenda. This paper blends the author's experience as a public relations practitioner in the Roman Catholic Church with Gerard Hauser's theory of publics and public spheres articulated in *Vernacular Voices: The Rhetoric of Publics and Public Spheres* to discover how organizations could improve their responses to crises.

Keywords: Catholic Church; Crisis communications; Gerard Hauser; Jurgen Habermas; Vernacular voices; Abuse scandal

One morning in winter 2002, I awoke to an NPR story in which Boston's Cardinal Bernard Law was apologizing about a sexual abuse case I had never heard of. As a public relations practitioner for a large Catholic diocese, I listened intently, though at the time, I had no idea where it would lead.

Law was discussing Fr. John Geoghan, who would eventually face some 200 accusations of child sexual abuse. As the scandal mushroomed, and scores of priests across the country – 90 in Boston alone – stood accused of sexual abuse (Globe, 2002), I found myself in the eye of perhaps the greatest public relations crisis an American religious institution has ever weathered.

The scandal produced 6 months of turmoil and absolutely brutal publicity that left in its wake a betrayed laity, a demoralized priesthood, and a church with an incredibly damaged public presence. "We are lay people; we are priests; we are religious," Mona Villarrubia (2002) wrote in the Jesuit magazine *America*.

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"We are practicing Catholics; we are ex-Catholics. All of us are hurting, and none of us can forget" (p. 18).

Now that the clouds have parted, communicators of all types probably have their own ideas about how the scandal should have been handled. Alongside their insight, I apply Gerard Hauser's (1999) work on public discourse to the scandal and argue that his understanding of "vernacular voices" opens a new perspective on public relations that could help organizations weather storms threatening to consume them.

1. Foundations

In this paper, I put the rhetorical literature on publics into dialogue with my experience in the communications office of a large Roman Catholic diocese in a medium-sized mid-Atlantic city. This paper is not a tactical essay (though its conclusions have practical implications), nor is it another critique of the church (though obviously some critique of the church's response will occur). Instead, it hopes to show how taking a different perspective on the publics practitioners engage could improve their approach to their work.

Though the uncertainty, the sense of betrayal, and the embarrassment may have been similar to other public relations crises, the clergy sex scandal was no average crisis. The gravity of the crimes, the depth of the mismanagement, and the outrage often left one speechless. The scandal was also incredibly complex. As Philip Jenkins (1996) has observed, sexual misconduct in the Catholic priesthood is a sociological, psychological, legal, theological, and ethical issue framed as much by anti-Catholicism and ideological disagreements with Catholic doctrine as by legitimate concerns over the safety of children.

The clergy sex scandal was something of a public relations "perfect storm." In the exploration that follows, I will use Gerard Hauser's work on the public sphere and "vernacular publics" to suggest a new perspective on public relations that could help institutions facing similar problems.

2. Hauser and Habermas's bourgeois public sphere

Gerard Hauser's contribution to the literature on public discourse must be understood in relation to Jürgen Habermas's (1962/1989) seminal work *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. In that work, Habermas discusses the discourse of middle class intellectuals in the coffeehouses and salons of Enlightenment Europe. Whether it was art, literature, or politics, Habermas contends, the coffeehouse debates of this "bourgeois public sphere" were distinguished by their rationality and critical detachment and, as such, were essential to the Enlightenment project of liberating humanity and creating a just moral order. For Habermas, though, these halcyon days of critical discourse were short-lived. Marxism, liberalism, and the expanding power of the state and commercial media, he argues, weakened the public sphere into a passive, mediatized culture of consumption that readily accepted the soporific manipulations of the elite.

In reading Habermas, it becomes clear that he is not only theorizing about publics but also casting the participants of public discourse into particular roles. As many have noted, Habermas' bourgeois public acts as a rational inquisitor of political power, a heroic critical public fighting for truth and justice (Burleson & Kline, 1979; Cushman & Dietrich, 1979; Francesconi, 1986; Mayhew, 1997). Every hero must have a villain, and for Habermas, the state and bureaucratic institutions fit the bill. With the rise of the bourgeois public, their once secret dealings would be pulled into public view to be made "the target