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Critical Reading of Media News. Analysis of the Conflict between Media and Social Representations, Based on the Example of Slovenian Media[1]

Abstract: Media content is not a matter of bare facts, but of their representations. The latter are often distortions of the truth and must therefore be interpreted critically. To do this requires not only a considerable personal effort and knowledge of the topic, but also professional expertise regarding the media content. For this reason, most users do not analyse media content, but interpret it intuitively or take it literally. Research shows that the negative topics with which the media most often associate the Church are sexual abuse, money and politics. Such sensational topics capture the attention of users and leave no room in the media for positive voices to be heard. In the present study, the topics and connotations of the articles were analysed. We find that serious socio-political issues related to the church are neglected in the media. How and to what extent should the Catholic Church respond to such media portrayals, how do Church documents encourage media engagement and how can critical reading of media portrayals be encouraged?

Keywords: media, social representations, Church, hermeneutics

Krytyczne czytanie wiadomości medialnych. Napięcia między mediami a reprezentacjami społecznymi

Streszczenie: Treści medialne nie dotyczą samych faktów, ale ich reprezentacji. Te ostatnie często zniekształcają prawdę. Dlatego należy je krytycznie interpretować. Wymagałoby to dużego osobistego wysiłku i wiedzy na dany temat, ale również profesjonalnej podstawy dla treści medialnych. Dlatego większość użytkowników nie analizuje treści medialnych, ale interpretuje je intuicyjnie lub traktuje dosłownie. Badania pokazują, że negatywne tematy, z którymi media najczęściej kojarzą Kościół, to nadużycia seksualne, pieniądze i polityka. Takie sensacyjne tematy przyciągają więcej użytkowników i nie dają głosu pozytywnym tematom

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w mediach. We wspomnianym badaniu przeprowadzono analizy tematów i konotacji artykułów. Okazuje się, że poważne tematy społeczno-polityczne związane z Kościołem są zaniedbywane w mediach. W jaki sposób i w jakim stopniu Kościół katolicki powinien reagować na takie reprezentacje medialne, w jaki sposób dokumenty kościelne zachęcają do zaangażowania mediów i jak zwiększyć krytyczne czytanie reprezentacji medialnych?

Słowa kluczowe: media, reprezentacje społeczne, Kościół, hermeneutyka

1. Introduction

The media facilitate the "circulation" of information among people and thereby shape and reinforce individual and societal representations, not just public opinion. Our contention is that the long-term formation of negative representations about the Church falls within the scope of the media's propaganda activity. The effect is negative as it influences the rise of Christianophobia in society.

As early as 1950, Karl Mannheim pointed out that propaganda has a corresponding influence on the processes of the symbolic construction of reality or produces long-term media effects (Mannheim 1950). Since the media use not only written and spoken text, but also images and sound that contain different codes, researchers have begun to look at the effects that mass media and their messages have on users (Katz in Lazarsfeld 1955).

Historically, the first theories about the influence of the media on the user appeared in the American Sociological Society as early as 1910. This theory was not scientific. It was called 'the hypodermic theory' because it claimed that the media had infinite power over the user. It was not until the 1940s and 1950s that researchers Robert K. Merton, Elihu Katz and Paul Lazarsfeld began to scientifically study the effects of the media on the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of individual members of society. They were the first to show that the effects of the media are not immediate, but that these effects are long-term and occur in two stages. Subsequently, this research has led to a number of findings that are still relevant today (Klapper 1960):

a) The mass media are not necessary and sufficient causes of certain effects on the audience, but interact with other indirect factors and sources of influence that mediate the relationship between the mass media and the audience.

b) The result of such interaction is primarily a reinforcing effect rather than a consistent and lasting change in pre-existing conditions (opinions, attitudes, behaviour).

c) If change does occur, it may be due to the mass media successfully promoting the change and the mediating factors failing;

d) For messages that explicitly aim to change users' opinions, attitudes and behaviour, the effectiveness of mass communication depends not only on the medium or communication itself, but also on the context in which the communication takes place.

The common finding of all researchers who have studied the impact of the media is that the media can influence the opinions, attitudes and behaviours of individual social actors. However, each person has their own specific psychological profile and social experiences (Losito 2004).

In a persuasive study into communication, Carl Hovland and his colleagues at Yale University, in the early 1950s proposed a model of persuasion that takes into account a) both the general process of perceiving a message and b) the general process of receiving it, which is still relevant today (Hovland, Janis in Kelley 1953). They claim that every communication is the result of a sequence of six phases.

The process of perception (ie, receiving information):

1) Exposure to the information;

2) paying attention to the information;

3) understanding the information.

The reception process (ie, acceptance of the information):

4) change of attitudes (internal attitudes);

5) consolidation of change;

6) action (behaviour).

On the one hand we have the media encoding the messages and on the other the audience decoding the messages. Stuart Hall outlines three hypothetical types of cultural decommodification: passive, negotiating and oppositional. In the case of television, it is a passive situation in which the audience decodes the message in the same cultural terms of reference in which it was constructed. Alternatively, we can have a situation of negotiation between the content of the message and the receiver. In this case, the viewer partly accepts and partly rejects the proposed cultural instances. Then there is the situation where the viewer objects or interprets the television message differently. This happens when the viewer, on the basis of completely different cultural codes, opposes the proposed cultural instances by radically rejecting them. This happens especially when there is a possibility of comparing the television representation of reality with other worldviews. The viewer is also familiar with other sources that contradict the dominant culture. (Hall 1973; Hall et al. 1980)

Plurality in the media, which does not escalate to extremes, is therefore very welcome, as it helps to break up the media monopoly. Media content users are informed by different perspectives. In any case, we can speak of the effect of different representations of the same reality: the media construct one reality or media representation, while the audience creates its own social representations.

Hall and colleagues also argue that there are two types of representations: one is our thoughts, the other is what we perceive in the environment. There are two processes: the creation of a 'conceptual map' and the process of 'signing'. The first is the "system" by which all kinds of objects, people and events are linked into a series of concepts and mental representations. Without this, we would not be able to interpret the world in such a way that it would have the same meaning for everyone. First, then, meaning depends on a system

of concepts and images formed in our minds that can stand for or "represent" the world, enabling us to relate to things inside and outside our minds. The second part is a common language. A shared conceptual map is not enough. We also need to be able to represent or exchange meanings and concepts. We can only do this if we have access to a common language. Language is therefore the second system of representation that is involved in the whole process of meaning construction. Our common conceptual map must be translated into a common language so that we can link our concepts and ideas to certain written words, vocal sounds or visual images. The general term we use for words, sounds or images that carry meaning is signs. These signs show or represent the concepts and the conceptual relationships between them that we carry in our minds and together they form the mental system of our culture. (Hall, Evans in Nixon 2013).

The media create representations of reality. They therefore have an impact on users. Losito stresses that the impact of the media should be observed not as a general theory of effects and not as a theory of the social impact of the media, but precisely as a theory of the impact of the media on the specific opinions, attitudes and behaviour of individual members of the public, each of whom has a particular psychological profile and social experience. (Losito 2004).

Social representations (SR) are more important than public opinion. Sergej Moscovici, the founder of the theory of social representations, defines them as a set of theories and ideologies, connected in the interaction of persons of a society or group. Their characteristic is that they transform (transmute) individual ideas into collective experiences, and interactions into collective behaviours. Social representations originate from modern society, the political, scientific, and human environment. They are dynamic, as rapid changes in society do not allow them to form into something permanent and unchanging. SRs directly increase heterogeneity in society and change "unification systems" (of official sciences, religions, ideologies). Where they cause changes, they become collective realities. The mass media accelerate the emergence of SRs by fostering heterogeneity in society and further multiplying changes and creating the need for connections between completely abstract "sciences" (or collective beliefs on one hand) and concrete activities of social individuals on the other (Moscovici 2005).

Media representations of the Catholic church therefore potentially influence people's social representations of the Catholic church.

2. More Christianophobia every year

Christianophobia is an irrational fear and loathing of Christianity. It refers to the spread of prejudice, the stigmatisation of Christians, media lynchings, political and social vested interests restricting the activities of Christian faith communities, the burning of crosses, the desecration of churches and chapels. (SŠK 2022)

A report by The Observatory on Intolerance and Discrimination against Christians in Europe shows that there was a 70% increase in discriminatory acts against Christians in Europe between 2019 and 2020. The areas of life most affected are church life, education, politics and the workplace. For example, in the field of education, it is noted that Christian university students are unable to freely discuss certain topics or express their opinions without condemnation or negative consequences, leading to the crippling effects of self-censorship (Chavez-Reder et al. 2012).

In Slovenia, the number of recorded cases of Christianophobia during our survey (in 2019) has doubled compared to the previous year. In its Annual Report 2019, the Catholic Church in Slovenia cites six cases of vandalism, most of which involve the destruction of religious symbols (crosses, chapels and other objects) and one case of offensive writing by a journalist from Mladina magazine (SŠK 2019).

In academia, there is no new research related to Christianophobia and media representations of the Catholic Church. Older European research on this topic looks at media representations of Muslims in Europe (Baker, Gabrielatos in McEnery 2013; Ameli et al. 2007). Slovenian research, however, only addresses the problems of representations of ethnic small groups in Slovenia (Petković et al. 2009) and Catholic Church finances and media ownership (Bašić-Hrvatin in Petković 2007).

We have examined this issue in more detail in Slovenia, from the perspective of the media and their representations of the Catholic Church. In the following, we will show who shapes the content, what the connotations of the reporting are and how negative representations of the Church are shaped.

3. Media content analysis

The study, which analysed 3,735 articles in print, radio, television and online media over four three-month periods of analysis in 2019, shows the beginnings of Christianophobia. Media representations of the Catholic Church during the research period are polarised into extremely negative and extremely positive connotations. The analysis covers newspaper articles of the print media, radio and television news stories of the news programme and online news of the Slovenian Press Agency (Kraner 2021).

Given that users are more sensitive to surprising and negative news, (Newman et al. 2022), we suspect that the media highlight the problems of the Church in order to gain more users (Wróbel 2017). The exploitation of the three ever-present themes (sexuality, finances and politics) is a constant to create moral panic and amplify the scandals of the Church. The research questions to verify our hypothesis are: who produces information about the Catholic Church (the media)? What is its content (topic)? How does it present the content (connotation)? When does it publish (socio-political context)?

Here we would like to highlight the following results of this research: 1) the connotations of the content according to the medium and 2) the topics covered.

3.1. Connotation of content by medium

In the analysis, the texts of the articles are evaluated according to four different connotations of the articles: positive, negative, balanced (positive and negative at the same time) and ideological (related to interests). The criterion for a positively connoted article requires that the text of the article describes the Catholic Church in an overall positive way. A negatively connoted text is one that describes the Catholic Church in a purely negative way. The highest number of positively connoted articles is in the local press, while the highest number of negatively connoted articles is in Dnevnik, Delo and Sta.si. (Table 1).[2]

Table 1. Connotation of articles by medium.
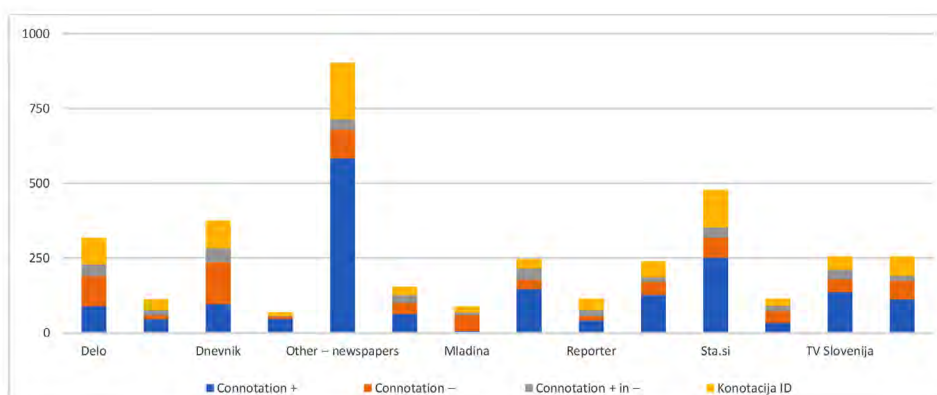
The balanced connotation of the text is that it highlights both positive and negative descriptions of the Catholic Church in the same article. The articles with the balanced connotation are the most frequent in Dnevnik, Delo, Radio Slovenia, TV Slovenia[3] and Sta.si.

The label "ideological" is used for all those articles that had neither positive nor negative descriptions of the Church, but only general, indifferent or ideological content. The majority of articles with ideological connotations in the analysis were found in the local press, Sta.si, Dnevnik and Delo.

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[2]   *Dnevnik* is based in Ljubljana. It is a centre-left newspaper. It has the largest readership in central Slovenia. In 2019, its circulation was 16,727 copies. *Delo* is Slovenia's national daily newspaper. It is based in Ljubljana. It had a circulation of 20,018 copies sold in 2021. The web daily *Sta.si*, or *Slovenian Press Agency*, is based in Ljubljana and has been published since 2015.

[3]   *Radio Slovenia* and *TV Slovenia* are Slovenia's national media.

Those media whose individual connotation exceeds 60 articles are found in Del, Dnevnik, Drugo-tisk, Radio Slovenia, Slovenske novice, Večer,[4] Sta.si and TV Slovenia.

Among the highly critical and negative opinions towards the Catholic Church in the analysed articles, there is a subtle demand that everyone must agree with the prescribed public opinion. The individual opinions of influential individuals are strongly pushed through the Slovenian media as the only true ones. The ideological and negative connotations of articles are increasingly spreading fear among dissenting voices and trapping them in a spiral of silence. (Noelle-Neumann 2002).

In conclusion, the local media write and report about the Church most often with a positive connotation because they are in direct contact with the local Church (or parish priest and parish) and because they report on concrete events. Dnevnik, Delo and some other media write and report about the Church with a negative connotation because they are not in touch with concrete events in the Catholic Church, with persons, and they stick to their editorial policy rather than to the reality of the events.

3.2. Topics related to the Catholic Church

The range of topics that appear in the media is limited. Topics related to the Catholic Church are grouped into 14 clusters. The largest number of articles describe Catholic events or rites. Next, topics on sexual abuse, politics and money stand out. (Table 2).

Table 2. Topics related to the Catholic Church

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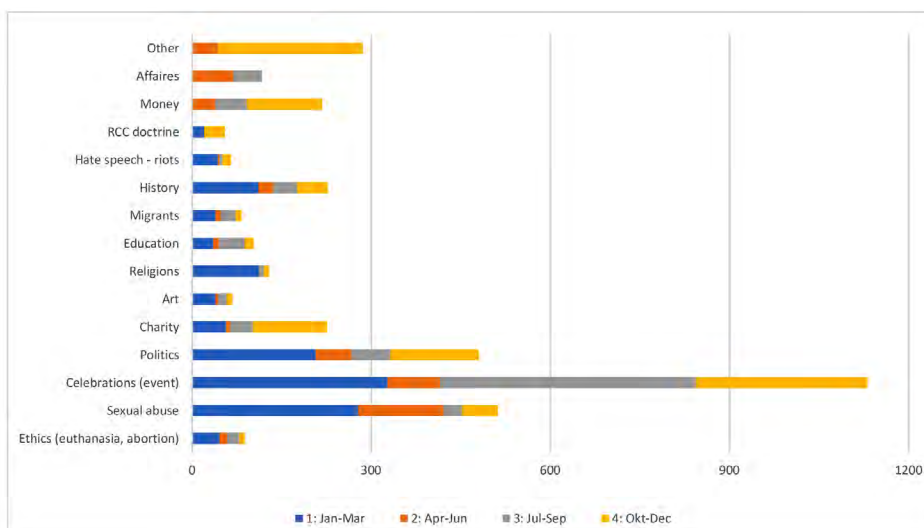
4   *Slovenske novice* is a Slovenian tabloid daily newspaper published by the *Delo* newspaper company and based in Ljubljana. In 2021, it had a circulation of 36,650 copies. *Večer* is based in Maribor. In 2017, it had a circulation of 22,933 copies.

almost non-existent. Articles talking about Christianophobia are also almost non-existent. Christianophobia is present in a very subtle way. Some authors constantly make accusations of the Church about the Crusades others accuse the Church of dictatorship and lack of freedom (the Church "baptises babies and forces them to join"), others accuse it of punitiveness (the Church forces believers, punishes them with ecclesiastical threats), others see it as intrusive (it converts non-Catholics), and so on. In short, we do not find verbal violence, but we do find sophisticated diction that stigmatises, labels and discriminates against Catholics.

4. Media dislike of the Church is not new

In the process of communication, verbal and visual language are considered codes, i.e. systems of signs and rules that allow a) representation, b) interpretation and c) transmission of information, but they are fundamentally differentiated by the relationship that links the sign (word or picture) to its corresponding meaning. (Lotto in Rumiati 2013).

Communication psychology deals with external and internal representations. These have been helpful in understanding the media and its users.

The above-mentioned analysis of media coverage in Slovenia is certainly a reflection of today's European society and its attitude towards the institutional church (Sadowsk 2021). It is not new that the media are not in favour of the Church.

Dulles has already pointed out seven conflicts between the Church and the media: The mystery of the Church versus the investigative research of the media; the perpetuity of Gospel truth versus the novelty of the media; the building of unity in the Church versus the disagreement and quarrelling of the media; the abstract language of the Church versus the concrete, specific and practical language of the media; hierarchical order within the Church versus democratic equality of all citizens; complex and intricate theological content versus simplistic media interpretations; faith-based justification versus secular interpretation of reality (Dulles 1994).

This fact does not surprise us today. Media communication is different from that of the Catholic Church. What is problematic is the social system which, in recent years, has portrayed the Catholic Church in the media, and by the public and the political elites, as an institution that is problematic for society. The a priori negative judgement, the beginnings of opposition to the Church and the stigmatisation of Catholics are striking. In certain articles there are subtle nuances of hostility, aggressiveness and spitefulness.

To help us understand this situation, we can use the theory of agenda-setting. The process of agenda-setting is a continuous effort by the advocates of a cause to get the attention of three social actors: people working in the media, the public and the political elite. This process helps us to explain why, in democratic countries, some issues are in the public eye and others are not. It also helps us to understand how public opinion is formed. An agenda is a collection

of issues. Depending on the importance of each issue, it is communicated to the public over a period of time. Since time periods are not static, since agendas are the result of dynamic interactions, certain issues appear and disappear at different points in time depending on their importance. Agendas therefore provide snapshots of this fluidity (Dearing in Rogers 1996).

Some argue that "the issue" is all that is controversial. It is a conflict between two or more social groups who disagree on a procedural or substantive matter (Cobb in D. 1981). This conflict needs to be highlighted for the public to see. This is why issues are defined as a social problem that is often conflictual and receives media attention (Ansolabehere in Iyengar 1994).

In the analysis of the Church as a subject in media reports shown here, it can be seen that the Church is most conflicted or controversial in matters dealing with current affairs, sexuality, politics and money (Table 3). This is followed by questions of education, charity, historical themes, art and culture. To the smallest extent, there are issues where the Church is considered as one of the religions and as a charitable institution.

Table 3. Connotation in Period 2 and Period 3 articles
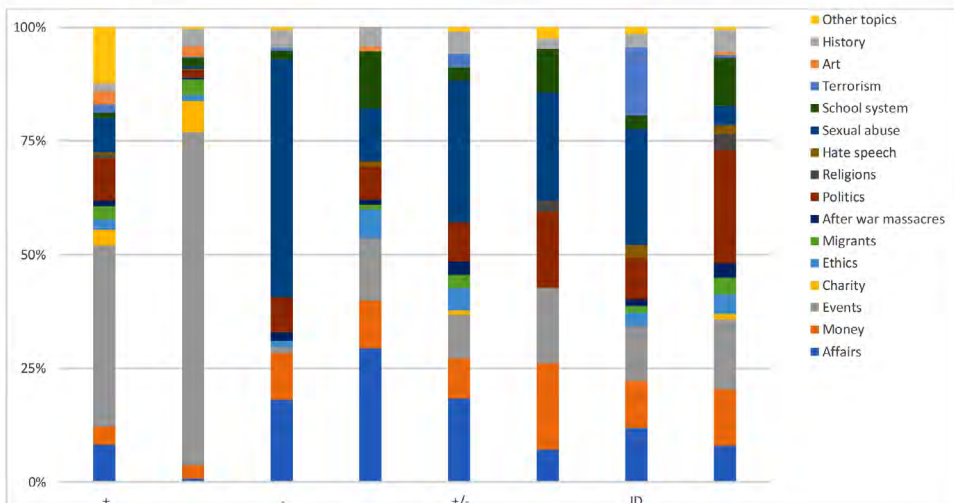
Socio-political issues where the Church could make a significant contribution to the betterment of society do not enter the public discourse because they are not controversial. This is confirmed by the results of connotation analyses, which show that such topics are neglected or negatively connoted in the media. Such topics include social issues (care for the elderly, education in Catholic schools, social assistance for the poorest), ethical issues

(euthanasia, abortion, artificial intelligence, etc.) and interreligious dialogue. This way of reporting on the Church in the media causes the Church to be removed from public discourse and portrayed only as a negative institution. Therefore, the statements that the media in Slovenia are complicit in the subtle spread of Christianophobia are not wrong, but at the same time they are not entirely true either. The current situation is not disastrous, although we do see negative trends in the media.

On the other hand, it is more problematic that the Church is not responding well to such issues. If it issues 3-4 press releases a year in the framework of the Justice and Peace Commission, this is not enough for a media breakthrough. If the Church wants to initiate an agenda-setting process, it has to continuously strive to get the attention of people working in the media, the public and the political elites on a certain issue (topic).

5. The need for pastoral responsiveness

The topics of sexual abuse, money and politics raised above fall under the umbrella of crisis communication.

Are we living in a time of fluid modernity or a society of uncertainty (Bauman 1999; Bauman 2012). For more than 30 years, evangelisation has been happening not only in physical spaces, but also on the internet. Church documents encourage thoughtful, careful and active work in this area (*Etika na internetu* 2002; *Cerkev in internet* 2002; *Pravilnik za katehezo* 2021).

This environment has brought with it a different way of communicating. Before the internet, institutions (including the Church) could be silent in crisis situations. Today, silence is the worst possible response to a crisis. De La Cierva, an expert on crisis communication in the Church, argues that institutions need to monitor their actions in four segments: prevention (what to do to avoid a potential crisis), planning (how to prepare for a potential crisis), communication (how to implement a communication plan in times of crisis) and evaluation (how to assess the organisation's response and how to establish recovery) (De la Cierva 2008).

All this requires great wisdom, truthfulness, but also an awareness that media messages are not always well received by users. Hall discusses three hypothetical positions for decoding media discourse. The first is the dominant-hegemonic position. The viewer fully and directly accepts the connoted meaning from the media and decodes the message according to the referential code in which it has been encoded. The second position is the negotiating position. Most users of media content understand what is dominantly defined. Decoding within the adapted and oppositional elements recognises the legitimacy of the hegemonic definition to create over-arching labelling, while on a more limited, situational level it creates its own ground rules. The third is the oppositional code. The user of media content fully understands

both the literal and connotative emphasis of media discourse, but decodes the messages in a pigeon-holingly opposite sense (Hall 2012).

Media representations are therefore not equally acceptable to all users: some accept them uncritically, others critically evaluate them, and still others reject them outright.

The UK is a very good example of a cutting-edge response to the media. In 2012, the international Catholic Voices project was launched. The motivation for the project began in 2010, when the UK was preparing for the visit of Pope Benedict XVI. Led by the project's initiator, Dr Austen Ivereigh, a group of lay people, Catholics, students or employees, decided to train themselves in public speaking in the media. The results were excellent. The group helped to bring about changes in the reporting of the Pope's visit as well as in the perception of the Church. Ivereigh then pointed to one of the essential ways we respond to the media. When we communicate in the media we should not expect everyone to be ready to listen to us immediately because people have too many filters that prevent this. This is a process that takes time, because the same event has to be presented in a completely different light (Ivereigh 2023).

Ivereigh summarises this process of reframing in the ten principles of good communication: 1. Don't get angry. Transform. 2. Be a light, not a fever. 3 Think in threes. 4. People remember not so much what you said, but more how it made them feel. 5. Actions count, not words. 6 Remember to say 'yes'. 7 Compassion counts. 8 Numbers are not everything. 9. It is the testimony that counts, not the victory. 10. It is not about you. Because Catholic Voices was independent of the bishops, even though it had their blessing, editors accepted it as media-friendly, ready for studio appearances, and not at all pretentious.

Conclusion

The media is also an area of pastoral action of the Church. In order to communicate with the media in a quality way, we need to understand that these are media representations of reality that can be accepted in their entirety, in part or be rejected in their entirety by the users. Social representations of the Church, or the mental images of the Church held by a particular group of people, are positive, despite negative opinions of the Church. The themes that stand out the most are sexuality, finance and politics. These topics fall into the area of crisis communication and each diocese should have a plan for them. Outside of crisis communication, there is a need to continually respond to current issues in a transformative way. At the same time, there is a need to educate those people who will be speaking publicly in the media so that they are able to respond in an Ivereigh manner of nuanced communication.

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