

Article

Determinants for the Development of the Activity of the Catholic Church in Poland in the Field of Social Communication

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Abstract: In recent years, the Catholic Church has been forced to change its attitude towards social communication and mass media. It has had to face not only religious but image challenges. Worldview matters, contemporary problems regarding the institution of marriage or pedophilia in the Church are constantly being debated in mass media, thus creating dangers in terms of critical public reception. This situation has also been occurring in Poland in recent years. The observed progress regarding opening the Church to media relations and the use of rich instruments of social communication have their reasons rooted not only in the history of the social and political events of the past several decades but also in the changes in the sphere of mass media and social communication. This article is an attempt to generate a peculiar typology of determinants regarding the development of social communication within the institutional church in Poland. Within our framework of methodological conditions, a literature query with available statistical analyses and observations of current events was applied. Our conclusions show the current attitude of the Catholic Church in Poland regarding issues related to the marketization of faith and the medialization of religion.

Keywords: social communication; catholic church; mass media; public relations; church marketing



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1. Introduction

The relations between the Catholic Church and mass media have evolved over centuries, ranging from detachment and criticism to acceptance, approval and conscious use of the media in evangelizing activities (Marcyński 2016; Gawroński and Majkowska 2018). The reform of the Second Vatican Council significantly changed the attitude of the institutional church to reality, opened it to changes and accepted a number of actions and activities that did not have the consent of the Holy See and church hierarchies by that time. The Second Vatican Council is indicated as one of the key events that changed the attitude of the Catholic Church to mass media, requiring the latter to adopt an attitude of openness to public opinion (Łęcicki 2012; Redden 2016; Shawchuck et al. 1992). In 1957, the encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* was published and, as a result of conciliar works, a decree on the means of social transmission of thoughts was created. *Interer Mirifica*, being the first church document of this rank, determined the attitude of the Church to the development of ways of communication and the evolution of mass media. The effects of these documents are also witnessed today in both the Holy See and local churches (Adamski and Łęcicki 2019). The attitude of the Catholic Church to mass media was certainly revolutionized by the teachings of John Paul II (Lewek 2008), while in Poland, the subject of the Church's mass communications was initiated by Polish Primate Stefan Wyszyński (Wyszyński 2002). Undoubtedly, the pontificate of John Paul II had a significant impact on the position and

deepening of mass media activity. Karol Wojtyła's reflections, expressing full approval of the media, were filled with wise, critical attitude, including his meetings with journalists, speeches to various media groups and associations. His television activity was also continued by Benedict XVI (Laskowska and Marcyński 2016) and by Pope Francis (Maibach 2015; Narbona 2016; Slatinek 2017).

Additionally, the current media activity of Pope Francis emphasizes the role of mass media in the life of the Church; thus the last three pontificates can be regarded as media friendly (Valentan 2019; Berger 1997). Media evangelization is only technically different from traditional forms of proclaiming the word of God because, despite its impersonal message, it is intended to help listeners see reality and themselves in a Christian and evangelical manner (Edwards 1990; Nielsen and Johansen 2019). In the ecclesial and liturgical space itself, reality is increasingly associated with media reality; for instance, during the transmission of the funeral liturgy of John Paul II, priests distributed Holy Communion to those gathered in front of TV screens and telebims (Draguła 2009).

The main goal of this article is an attempt to capture the factors and variables that result in an increased interest in social communication by the Catholic Church in Poland and the need to professionalize this communication. Additionally, this paper seeks not only to contribute to the theory by generating a specific typology of determinants of the development of social communication of traditional institutional churches but also to create a catalogue of problems and directions for further activities for the communication of the Church in Poland.

Social communication is understood by the authors as a social process of communication between individuals, groups or institutions (Dobek-Ostrowska 2002). Its purpose is to exchange thoughts and share knowledge, information and ideas. This process takes place at various levels (McQuail 2010) with the use of various means and produces specific effects (Goban-Klas 2004; Gawroński and Jakubowski 2018). The authors of this article, having analyzed the literature on the issues discussed, form hypotheses that the basic channels activating the Catholic Church in Poland (in order to undertake greater activity in the field of social communication) include:

- Mediatization of social life.
- The need to manage communication as a result of emerging crises that threaten the good name of the Church and its hierarchs.

The applied methodology is primarily an analysis of the existing data, including internal documents of church institutions, statistics and a literature review. With the usage of typical classifications (Cooper 1988; Randolph 2019), the adopted method is aimed at identifying key issues, concentrating on research results through a presentation focused on support. The characteristics of the determinants of the communicative activity of the Polish Catholic Church constitute a specific case study that provides the opportunity to explain the specificity of the described entity. Moreover, they provide an area for comparison between Poland and other countries and communities. The selected case study method is treated as a research method containing a broad description of a given phenomenon, which is aimed at its in-depth analysis and evaluation. Thus, this is qualitative research which, through the use of data collection and analysis techniques, allows us to solve scientific and practical problems (Stake 1978; George and Bennett 2005).

2. The Specific Role of the Catholic Church in Poland

The Catholic Church in Poland still seems to be the Church with the greatest political influence on the Christian world. It has achieved most of its political goals, including an effective ban on abortion, the introduction of religion to schools, and has influenced restrictions on access regarding some conceptual notions. The Church is therefore an important political entity in Poland. Poland is one of those European countries in which religiosity is manifested in a special way. The high religiousness of Poles in the period of political transformations that took place in the country after 1989 refutes the widespread myth that a developed society must be accompanied by a process of secularization (Borowik

2002). The specificity of the presence of the Catholic Church in social life in today's Poland is represented by the interpenetrating relations between the state and the Church. Polish society is characterized by one of the highest rates of religiosity in Europe. More than 90% of Polish people are believed to be believers. In Poland, in comparison with other European countries, the rates of religiosity are slowly dropping, which sociologists define as "creeping secularization". In 1990, 50.3% of believers participated in Sunday Mass; in 2013, this decreased to 39.1%, in 2016 to 36.7%, in 2018 to 38.2% and in 2019 to 36.9%. According to the data of the Institute of Statistics of the Catholic Church, the percentage of people declaring themselves as deeply religious is approximately 11%. Women believe more often; among them, 14.4% declare being deeply religious, 70.3% claim to be religious and only 2.1% are unbelievers. Among men, these numbers are, respectively: 7.6%—deeply religious; 68.8%—believers; 4%—non-believers. The number of those declaring moral attitudes consistent with the teaching of the Church, especially in the sphere of sexual ethics, is decreasing. For example, only about 20% of believers deem sexual intercourse unacceptable before marriage. This particular issue is visible especially in young people, whose level of religious practice has dropped by half over 30 years (Przeciszewski and Łączny 2021). Churches in Poland are still full of the faithful; even during the COVID-19 pandemic, they were visited much more often than in many western European countries. Nevertheless, the Catholic Church in Poland does not play the role it used to play in communist times, when participation in services was treated by many Poles as an act of opposition to totalitarian rule. However, today's Poland is becoming more and more secular. Polish society is changing; traditional values play a smaller role than before. In recent years, high-profile protests against the new, more restrictive anti-abortion law have been organized. The death of the Polish Pope John Paul II in 2005 was probably of importance (Gowin 1995), as the majority of Poles identified with him. Moreover, dissatisfaction with still unexplained cases of paedophilia and other forms of sexual harassment by clergy plays a large role in Poland. Another factor contributing to the reduction in the role of the Catholic Church in Poland is the fact that it is referred to by the ruling right-wing parties, which are not liked and accepted by a significant part of the young generations of Poles.

3. Mediatization of Social Life and the Activity of the Polish Church

Mediatization of social life appears as a relatively new concept of understanding alongside the theorizing of transformations in everyday life, culture and society in the context of the progressive transformation of the media. In addition to globalization, individualization and commercialization, it is placed among the main social processes that have changed contemporary culture and communication (Hjarvard 2011, 2013). The term mediation will soon be 100 years old, as it was coined in 1933 by Ernst Manheim (1993). The term was initially used to describe changes in social relations in modernity, changes that were caused by the emergence of mass communication.

In the 1990s, mediation was combined with political issues, thanks to which it was reduced to the phenomenon of mediation in politics (Mazzoleni and Winfried 1999). This concept was based on the theories and research of M. McLuhan (1964), J. Merowitz (Flayhan 2001) and Altheide and Snow (1979).

It is true that modern humans derive most of the information about the world around them from media reports. This opinion can be based, for example, on statistical data referring to the time people spend on the consumption of media messages. According to Nielsen Audience, in 2019, an average Polish person devoted 4 h and 16 min each day to watching television (Nielsen Audience Raport 2020), while they used the Internet for 2 h and 6 min per day (Gemius Raport 2020).

In most European countries, even well-established Christian denominations have lost importance in recent decades. To prevent this, various remedial techniques have been used, including communication strategies, adapting churches to the changing world and the requirements of the faithful. On the one hand, sociologists of religion emphasize the importance of direct communication in this area, while other media and communica-

tion researchers emphasize the possibilities that can be found in indirect communication (Wiesenberg 2020). The presence of mass communication in terms of the evangelizing activity of the Church is a separate sphere of mediatization of social life (Hjarvard 2011; Loevheim 2011; Loevheim and Lynch 2011). Although it may seem that the relationship between the Church and mass media is an effect of interactions revealed only in recent decades, the ecclesial acceptance of the means of mass communication and the progressing symbiosis between them and the Church have their source at the dawn of radio and television history (Hoover 2006; Stollow 2005). A. Draguła, analyzing the issue of the historical and contemporary presence of the transmission of holy mass in these media, comes to the conclusion that, while radio transmission met with initial reserve on the part of the Church, television transmission very quickly gained the approval of the church hierarchy, which was reflected in the appreciation of the value of the ‘mediated Eucharist’ in the official documents of the Church (Draguła 2009).

Contemporary missionary activity by the Church takes full advantage of the richness of the possibilities offered by mass communication. This results in appreciating the fact that evangelization by means of television (and other mass media) is, in practice, reaching for a more effective tool, enabling access to wide masses of people and effectively speaking to them with a simple, suggestive language of pictures and sounds (Baczyński 1998). For obvious reasons, mass media and new media (Leonowicz-Bukała et al. 2021) cannot replace the evangelizing mission of the Church; however, based on the statement by K. Nycz, it can perform an important pre-evangelizing function (Nycz 2011).

Mass communication means—by performing numerous social functions—not only provide information about events that take place in reality but also create these events, shape public opinion and influence human attitudes. They have a significant impact on individual decisions and social behavior, and can activate audiences or shape passive auditoriums. Most of all, they build the image of brands, institutions, organizations and people, because recipients of media messages are looking for confirmation or denial of subjective judgments of reality in the media. For any organization, (regardless of whether it is an enterprise, public institution, political party, social organization or church community), giving up cooperation with mass media means weakening the ability to communicate with an environment and influence the opinions, attitudes and behavior of people who are the target group of their interactions. It also means reducing the ability to learn about people’s needs, habits and expectations (Gawroński 2013).

The institutional Catholic Church in Poland has not developed any strategic documents similar to corporate communication strategies. In this approach, the communication strategy would constitute a specific catalogue of formal goals, defining target groups, shaping official content distribution channels and organizing the course of communication processes (Przybysz 2013). The Church in Poland is a kind of a “corporation” of independent entities, which consists of the Polish Bishops’ Conference, archdioceses and dioceses, as well as religious orders and congregations. In addition, the non-institutional church and its communication activities are also active; they are inspired and led by lay faithful, non-profit organizations, foundations and associations. This form of activity cannot be included in any organizational framework or any strategic documents.

Observing the practice of the communicative activity of the Polish Church, it is difficult to say whether the Episcopal Conference plays a superior role because it neither coordinates communication activities nor influences the regional or local methods of the bishops’ way of communicating. Nevertheless, it is the Episcopal Conference that constitutes the most general and loudest voice of the Polish Church as an institution. A special role in the field of influencing mass media is played by the Presidium of the Episcopal Conference, including, first of all, the chairman, the deputy and the secretary. The secretary, as the direct superior of the press spokesman, supervising the press office, has real possibilities to influence the shape of communication policies (Art. 40 of the Statute of the Polish Bishops’ Conference 2021).

The Secretary-General is responsible for the Press Office, headed by the Conference Spokesperson, elected by the Plenary Assembly, who maintains contacts with the media.

The press office is issued by the official organ of the Conference. The advisory body is the Council for Social Communications within the structure of the Bishops' Conference. Its purpose is defined as providing proper pastoral care to people of the Catholic media and the media in general. This includes taking care of media positions established in the dioceses, either within existing pastoral care protocols or separate communities. One of the tasks of the Council is to deal with the postulate of the Catholic Association of Journalists regarding the organization of a pilgrimage of media people to Jasna Góra Monastery (the most important place of pilgrimage for Catholics in Poland). The establishment and activity of the Council for Social Communications at the Polish Bishops' Conference is a response to the teaching of the Church after the Second Vatican Council.

The basis for the functioning of the Council is the activity of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, which develops, takes and presents the position of the Church on important issues related to the broadly understood means of social communication, their achievements and threats (Statute and Regulations of the Polish Episcopal Conference). The press spokesperson of the Conference is a real "tool" of communication between the institution of the Church and the mass media. Article 71 of the Regulations of the Polish Bishops' Conference states that the spokesperson is elected by a plenary meeting for a period of five years. He may perform his function for subsequent terms. The same document regulates that the tasks of the Spokesperson include, in particular: presenting the position of the Polish Bishops' Conference; maintaining ongoing contacts with journalists; assisting journalists in accessing information about the activities of the Conference and its activities as well as the statutory bodies; supporting the Conference in contacts with the media; managing the work of the Press Office. The Spokesperson carries out the above tasks, *inter alia*, through: issuing announcements and statements; organizing briefings and press conferences; giving interviews and statements for domestic and foreign media; cooperation with the media as well as church and secular institutions.

There are two other institutions supporting the Church's communication activities: the Catholic Information Agency (CIA) and the "Opoka" Foundation. The CIA realizes communication goals through: preparation of information services and problem materials regarding religious events; transferring collected information, opinions and other materials to the media; organizing foreign correspondence; press service for the Polish Bishops' Conference; conducting, organizing and financing propagation, information and publishing activities (Przeciszewski and Łączny 2021).

The goal of the "Opoka" Foundation is to develop, cooperate and coordinate Internet activities of the Catholic Church in Poland for local, national and global use. According to P. Siuda (2010, 2012), we can distinguish four dimensions of religious places on the Internet—innovative religion (e.g., new religious movements), traditional religion (large "traditional" religions, such as Christianity), religion on the Internet (information on various religions) and network religion (religious activities undertaken in cyberspace) The Internet activity of the Church in Poland is essentially focused on the last three and is treated as e-pastoral work.

Although the indicated description of the structure of church communication institutions may seem clear, and even suggests an activity based on strategic conditions, it is a dispersed system and is not coordinated by a single decision-making center. Additionally, within local churches, there is complete freedom in shaping communication policies by bishops. They are completely independent in shaping communication policies in their area. Thus, in Poland, each of the more than 40 dioceses has a media policy defined, which is neither correlated between dioceses but nor does it take into account the priority of communication of the Bishops' Conference. The only initiative that brings together several dozen press spokesmen of church units is the annual workshop meeting for press spokesmen. The spokesmen of religious orders training was organized for the first time in 2007. Since 2009, due to the initiative of the spokesperson of the Polish Bishops' Conference, they were joined by the spokesmen of the diocese; three years later, they were joined by the

spokesmen of other church institutions, chancellors of the curia and higher superiors of orders and congregations (Kloch 2013).

The participants of the meetings listen to lectures, take part in practical exercises and exchange their own experiences. Lay Catholics, nuns and priests come to the meetings. Almost all of them have completed university studies or courses in journalism, PR, media relations or theology of the media. Some have doctorates in these fields. Workshops are usually over 20 h of classes conducted by academics, journalists and lawyers. However, the initiative of annual meetings does not stimulate an atmosphere of cooperation in the creation of a uniform communication policy of the Church.

Taking into account the above information, it should be stated that the missing communication strategy is a concept that still needs to be developed by the Church in Poland. It will not be easy, mainly due to the difficulties in coordinating the activities of local churches and the multitude of entities shaping the actual image of the Church's institutions.

4. Church Crisis Communication

Skillful communication with the environment plays a special role in the event of a crisis situation, which may result in the organization suffering both serious image losses and loss of trust, as well as legal and economic problems. Depending on the type, nature and scale of the crisis, the organization is obliged to skillfully conduct a dialogue with various subjects from both the internal and the external environment. Crisis communication is therefore an evident example of the multi-level use of social communication for the needs of effective management. At the same time, it is a marketing communication subsystem because its goals are mainly oriented on the image of the organization—its protection or the minimization of image loss (Moedinger 2001). Numerous authors dealing with the issues of crisis management and crisis communication list the catalog of principles that should apply in the event of crises. These focus on determining the stages of crisis management (Iwankiewicz-Rak 2004), categorizing key messages (Tworzydło 2019) and establishing rules of cooperation with various groups of interested people (Anthonissen 2010).

Churches experience a crisis when the number of members decreases, which results in financial difficulties (Dreyer 2015). In this regard, the crisis is limited to the disadvantage experienced by the Church as an institution, when its structures, finances and traditions are under pressure and require remedial action. Increasingly, however, crises that affect the Catholic Church relate to irregularities in its functioning. Crisis situations arise when the church becomes what should be a contradiction (Fox-Genovese 2003). The last time this occurred was in relation to the ineffective management of communication in connection with sexual abuse and paedophilia (O'Brien 2021; Tworzydło et al. 2020; Wirenius 2015). These crises do not only concern the Catholic Church, although it is most often the subject of media and public interest in the context of moral scandals (Hiilamo 2021). Recently, crisis situations have happened in the Catholic Church in Poland. Their basis is most often financial and refers to a lack of transparency within the church's financing system. That said, image attacks on the institutional church and the clergy regarding the immoral behavior of some clergy representatives (revealed by and through mass media) are equally frequent. The decline in trust in the Church in Poland was also influenced by the fact that, along with the change in the political system, the Church became one of many institutions in the emerging political situation without its own identity and mission, as well as its own interests (Rychard 1991). According to J. Marianski, criticism of the Church in Polish society that has existed since the political transformation has recently been taking on much more serious proportions.

The catalogue of accusations, present in society for over twenty years, has not changed and includes: excessive attachment of priests to material goods (Roguska 2012, p. 4), concern for regaining the privileges lost during communist times, excessive influence in society and actively participating with politics (Hipsz 2011), conservative morality and attempts to impose it on the whole society, as well as scandals involving some bishops and priests, publicized by the mass media (Marianski 2011). However, it is not only these

factors that are triggering crisis situations. According to M. Przybysz (2009), the Church is characterized by persistence in a state of permanent crisis because “it is a permanent sign of opposition to the civilization of death, anti-culture, armaments and aggression, against communism and imposing anthropology without God, the lifestyle of *etsi Deus non daretur*, and in this sense the crisis is inscribed permanently in its life”.

This permanent crisis seems to be a phenomenon that is increasing in nature, which is confirmed by Fr. K. Sowa, who states that: “The church has become a whipping boy, and some of the media have only now noticed and started shouting that the church has ceased to be a holy cow. This subject has always been present in the media, but now it has been promoted to the mainstream”. (Rutkowska 2012). Therefore, it indicates that the Church in Poland must face crisis situations like never before, especially those related to media coverage, which should force efforts to change the approach of the church hierarchy in matters of openness to the media and public opinion, as well as professionalization of communication activities.

Based on research by the Public Opinion Research Center on the social assessment of public institutions, including the Catholic Church, several important stages can be distinguished that change the attitude of the public in this matter (Figure 1).

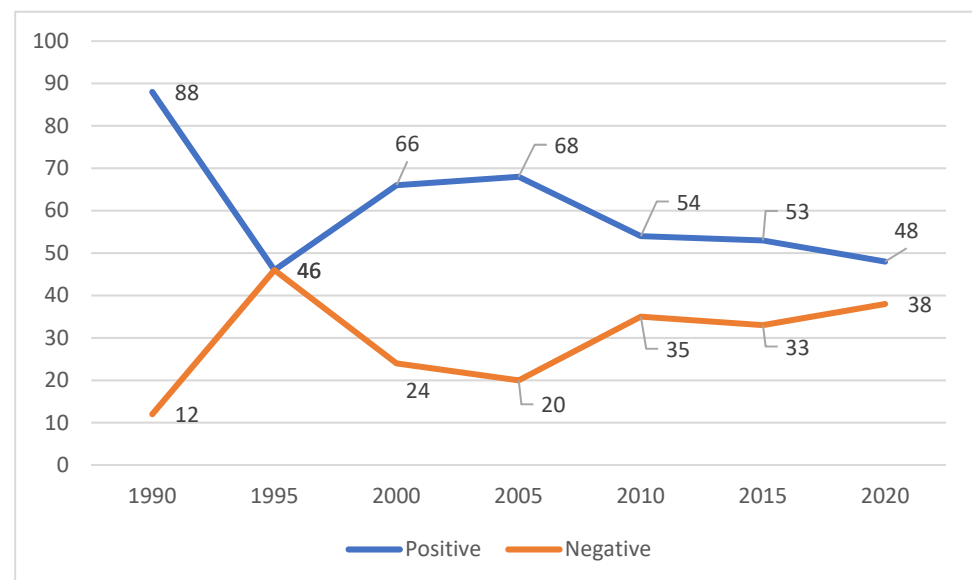


Figure 1. Assessment of the Catholic Church in Poland in the years 1990–2020. Source: Authors’ research based on CBOS reports on opinions on public institutions in the years 1990–2020. <http://www.cbos.pl> (accessed on 11 December 2020) and Sadłoń and Organek (2019).

The beginning of the 1990s was characterized by a sharp decline in public support for the Church. According to Z. Nosowski (2011), three key factors played an important role in this respect:

- Errors by the Church itself, manifested in the behavior of many bishops, allowing the public to suppose that they were seeking direct influence on the state authority;
- Involvement of the Church in discussions on legal regulations in unpopular and socially controversial matters, mainly abortion;
- The transition of religion and the church from the pattern established during the Polish People’s Republic to a model of more active participation in public life (i.e., the return of religion lessons to schools, chaplains in prisons and military units), which caused a discussion on the threat of building a religious state.

Interesting data representing a myth concerning the involvement of the Church in politics is provided the CBOS-Agency report, which is devoted exclusively to this topic. While the political involvement of clergy is critically assessed, and the view on the apolitical

position of the Church is universally applicable, in colloquial opinions, there is a scheme assessing the Church as an active participant in the political life of Poland. Meanwhile, the majority of respondents declare that they do not notice the political involvement of church structures (Hipsz 2011).

Another factor negatively affecting the image of the Church is the issue of the co-financing of churches from the state budget and the demand for transparency of church finances (Roguska 2012).

Crisis management in the Church is arduously becoming a topic that is addressed more frequently. As Nosowski (2012) rightly observes, the Polish Church is characterized by the inability to formulate a clear strategy of action. The Church adopts a defensive attitude that is limited to responding to emerging problems without being involved in creating media information and topics relevant to public debate. Reactions are often not adequate to the required needs. They are fast and violent when balanced and calm words are needed instead. At the beginning of the 21st century, the Catholic Church in Poland has been forced to deal with image problems in an intensified way.

In Poland, the problem of pedophilia in the Church is complex and has many aspects. To some extent, it reflects the global trend revealing the scale of pedophilia in the Catholic Church in the wider world but, as this issue is not limited only to church institutions, it requires separate and wider considerations (Tworzydło et al. 2020). Image and communication crises are usually rooted in various areas of the Church's social and political activity. Incompetent management of communication in this regard may constitute an additional contribution to negative consequences in terms of social perceptions.

5. Conclusions

The persistent critical opinions of a significant part of Polish society towards the Catholic Church provides clear evidence that information policy, communication strategies and image activities (including those that fall within the sphere of church marketing and the use of marketing communication) have not been conducted skillfully. The Church in Poland has been losing confidence in its image and its good name almost at its own request by making basic mistakes related to inefficient communication. Of course, there are arguments that the Church has been called to preach the good news and to show the border between good and evil, so it does not have to be liked. However, is this true? Does "pleasing" not facilitate the ministry defined in this way?

In the creation-dominated world of the image-related impact of marketing communication—substantively focused on results and based on the results of empirical research—opinion polls are a fragment of marketing activity (Zaidman 2007). They provide incomplete information that is not always representative but that can sometimes create reservations regarding credibility. However, they can also provide a measurable effect of interactions that, some time ago, should have been treated as completely immeasurable.

From the point of view of the Polish Catholic Church, there are at least three factors still relevant and important for public opinion with which the institutional church still cannot cope and that require special care in the field of social communication management:

- Excessive involvement in political affairs;
- Transparency of church finances and rules for the financing of the Church by the state;
- Difficulties in managing crisis situations, in particular media crises.

An important aspect, going beyond the catalog of presented postulates, is the necessity of even greater openness by the Church. This is especially so of its representatives responsible for social communication in the sphere of mass media functioning. The encouragement of Benedict XVI (2009, p. 25), directed towards church spokesmen, spoke of a greater commitment to new technologies and new media: "I would like to encourage those who are active in the field of communication in the Church and are responsible for pastoral care to take on the challenges they face with evangelization new technologies. (...) It is the properties of the new media that enable, on a wide scale and on a global scale, consultation, sharing and coordination, which not only increases the effectiveness of proclaiming the

Gospel message, but also avoids unnecessary waste of resources and resources.” In respect to this issue, this is of great significance.

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