

Giovanni Tridente

**BECOMING A VATICANIST**  
Religious Information in the Digital Age

(INCLUDES A GLOSSARY)

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*To Laura*  
*Pablo and Miriam*

## PREFACE

I've worked as a vaticanist for 42 years: six years with *La Repubblica* and 36 years with *Corriere della Sera*. I met important people working at newsrooms, in the Vatican and around the world. I have remained updated, I have traveled; with my paycheck, I have supported five children and with these advantages, I believe I have balanced both the bitterness of fast-paced profession until it becomes merciless — to uncomfortable times when applied to such a vast subject as is the Church — and the commercial media that inevitably brings it to their level. Which I will not say is low, but at market value.

In many years of *vaticanism*, I have also gained indirect advantages that bring about results beyond the balanced parameters. I have learned the art of discovering and narrating life stories, which is a way of loving mankind. I have been made aware of a strict work ethic and a citizenship, which is honored in the world of media even when it is not followed through. I have learned humility. I have become close to many men of God who have helped me to believe and remain human.

Therefore, I can do nothing more than encourage those who wish to take a leap into this journalistic specialization. Giovanni Tridente's book provides a compass for that adventure. I will add some advice on the relationship between the laboratory of the vaticanist and the general editorial of big media. Between the well-provided *desk* at the Vatican, where texts of histories and documents are written in Latin and the *open space* of the "political sector" or the "news section" where a professional must "sell" his "piece" and must either bargain for a space, contend with advertising or scandalous news.

It is in that often noisy and daring environment that a vaticanist must ultimately resist the innate vocation of mass communication to manipulate the image of the Church, more than every other image associated with humanity.

In fact, the media tends to deform religious news. They deform it both in a lofty or ideological style and low or sensational style. The overall effect is a two-fold deformation of the image of the Church: the first style tends to constrict it under a type of politic, the second tends to relegate it to light news.

In the news business, strong news casts out the weak. And religious news risks becoming very weak every time it is reduced to a verbal message or a report on the internal events of the religious community. However, it can be strong when it conveys a gesture or a life story.

The language of ecclesial communications doesn't always help the vaticanist in his or her struggle to defend religious news. Often, in fact, it isn't cared for in its comprehension in the wider context of life that journalistic disclosure is aimed toward. This expectation — of a global understanding — should not be viewed with

suspicion by men of the Church: the intention to reach an understanding media means taking care that religious language has common sense. In this, Pope Francis continuously teaches by example.

The vaticanist learns quickly that gestures and facts can be more eloquent than speeches: more eloquent in life and in the media. A good example of a Christian “gesture” excellently conveyed by the media is John Paul II’s visit to Ali Agca at Rebibbia prison on December 27, 1983. The image of the Pope entering the cell of his attacker and speaking with him for 21 minutes had 20 times more coverage in newspapers and television than they dedicated a year before to his encyclical “Dives in Misericordia.”

Another example of good Christian communication through gestures and facts is Mother Teresa’s entire life: a woman who almost didn’t know how to speak and said very few words, yet made herself understood by all — and well-versed in the media — through her innumerable acts of genius in charity.

To make facts more eloquent with respect to the words, there isn’t just the laziness of the media in the era of television and digital communication. Upon closer inspection, the root of this ecclesial privilege of gestures and life stories is the fact that the Christian message is news and witness. The instinctive preference of the media for facts can be a significant stimulus to the ecclesial community. This is not without reason: this expectation of the world — conveyed by the media — that the Church never forgets to accompany the evangelical news with the witness it accredits.

And the facts are always in the Church: it is their understanding and communication that is generally infe-

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rior to their consistence. The vaticanist may practice understanding this profound dynamic of the witness-based communication of faith through the study of preaching through Pope Francis' deeds and gestures. The eleven "Fridays of Mercy" which marked the celebration of the extraordinary Jubilee year can be understood as eleven small masterpieces of proclaiming through signs and words.

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## INTRODUCTION

Informing on the Catholic Church requires certain features that go beyond the classical procedures of “simple” journalism: its social projections are inseparably linked to its spiritual nature and understanding this is the first step in a journalistic report that is faithful to the reasoning and identity of the institution.

Such a premise opens the path to various other specificities to know and delve into, starting from the dynamic that characterizes the “production” of information by the Church itself, linked to the original mandate of its founder, to the principles that animate it and hierarchal structure that characterizes it.

By including this, one can pass to examining the channels from where to draw materials to elaborate (sources, documentation), which is also very specific, without omitting in this case the formative aspect and professional growth. Good institutional communication support will then make the difference.