

# The Roman Catholic Church in America Through Online Media: A Narrative Analysis

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## Abstract

*Through the use of narrative analysis, this research sought to analyze how the Catholic Church, arguably the world's largest organization, represented itself through the use of its official online communications. Using framing and agenda-setting theories, the study examined the news subsidies of both the Vatican and U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops. The research revealed that the Catholic Church promoted messages that emphasized the importance of social reform and the sacredness of human life, engaging in social justice works around the world, celebrating cultural diversity and interfaith dialogue, and upholding the authority of the Church hierarchy. Ultimately, this study intended to identify dominant discourses about Catholicism in American culture.*

## I. Introduction

The Roman Catholic Church, an institution boasting over a billion members worldwide, is arguably the world's largest organization. While it spans myriad cultures, languages, races, political and social ideologies it remains, according to the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, "the sole Church of Christ which in the Creed we profess to be one, holy, catholic and apostolic" (1994). Despite its claim as the one true Church founded by Jesus Christ, the Catholic Church faces many challenges in today's world. In just about every form of media, the Church is frequently under attack, questioned, or undermined for its religious doctrines or stances on contentious political and moral issues. Between questionable depictions in popular literature (i.e. *Hitler's Pope*, *The Da Vinci Code*) to unflattering representations in television or film (i.e. *Religulous*, *Doubt*, *Dogma*), the Church has faced numerous challenges to both its identity and relevance in recent years.

The purpose of this study is to examine the ways in which the Roman Catholic Church—comprised of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (USCCB) and the Holy See (also known as the Vatican or the Roman Curia), collectively—represents itself through its official online communication. The Roman Curia (2010), according to its website, serves as the official authority for the universal Church:

In exercising supreme, full, and immediate power in the universal Church, the Roman pontiff makes use of the departments of the Roman Curia which, therefore, perform their duties in his name and with his authority for the good of the churches and in the service of the sacred pastors. *CHRISTUS DOMINUS*, 9

For purposes of this study, the USCCB is also recognized as the official authority of the Catholic Church in the United States. According to Sister Mary Ann Walsh, director of media relations for the USCCB, "when the bishops want to speak as one, they do so through the USCCB... the USCCB could be considered

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the official voice of the church in the United States (Walsh, personal communication, February 02, 2010).

The research question used to guide this study is: In what ways does the Catholic Church represent itself through its official online communication?

## II. Literature Review

While no extant research has been conducted concerning the self-representation of the Catholic Church, thus making this an exploratory study, the Church's move toward online media is seen as an attempt to modernize its message for its more than one billion followers worldwide. In Pope Paul VI's decree *Inter Mirifica*, he called for Church leaders to use new inventions in media that have the power to "reach and influence not only individuals, but the very masses and the whole of human society" (1963, par. 1). A select few had already risen to the pope's call: Archbishop Fulton Sheen, who hosted the show *Life Is Worth Living* from 1952 to 1955, used television as a tool of social communication to broadcast a message of Jesus Christ that appealed to American Catholics. According to a study titled *Prime-Time Catholicism in 1950s America: Fulton J. Sheen and 'Life is Worth Living,'* the archbishop's show "adeptly identified real anxieties and tensions beneath the official celebratory national ideology of the 1950s and used such concerns as an opportunity to create a new image of Catholicism for national television audiences" (Smith, 1997, p. 73). The study added that "Sheen presented a Catholicism that addressed millions of Americans through their television screens and offered the promise of a happy, harmonious future for a traditional, godly America" (Smith, 1997, p. 73-74).

The Church's use of online media comes at an important time for a centuries-old religion. In a 2000 study by Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson titled *Media Coverage of the Catholic Church, 1963-1998*, it was determined that the news media often frame the Catholic Church as a political rather than a theological institution, using negative generalizations and stereotypes to project an unfavorable view of the Church onto American culture. The study also revealed that media sources supporting the Church were less frequent than those in opposition, especially when concerning topics of major social controversy, such as freedom of expression or birth control. According to the study, "Controversial issues were frequently presented as conflicts between the Church hierarchy, on one side, and lower-level clergy, lay Catholics, and non-Catholics on the other" (Lichter, Lichter, and Amundson, 2000).

A story that consistently makes headline news, the sex abuse crisis is one of the major challenges facing the Vatican today, and could require a public relations overhaul on the Church's part to help quell the problem. *The Boston Globe*, the newspaper renowned for breaking the now infamous Catholic clerical sexual abuse scandal in 2002, authored a book that same year titled *Betrayal: The Crisis in the Catholic Church*. The book offers an examination of the scandal from a secular news perspective, claiming that "even in the absence of hard data, it seemed increasingly clear that, although clergy from every religious denomination have sexually violated children, no major denomination has had a problem of the scale that has plagued the Catholic Church" (Boston Globe, 2002, p. 166-167). A 2008 study conducted by the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, titled the *Pew Forum's U.S. Religious Landscape Survey – Religious Beliefs and Practices: Diverse and Politically Relevant*, offers support for the argument that coverage of the sex abuse scandal in the U.S. may be linked to an increased secularization among Americans. Among other findings, the Pew study found that, among a group of religious traditions that also included Protestant Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism, and non-religious (self-prescribed non-practitioners, atheists and agnostics), "Catholicism has experienced the greatest net losses as a result of affiliation changes. While nearly one-in-three Americans (31%) were raised in the Catholic faith, today fewer than one-in-four (24%) describe themselves as Catholic" (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008, p. 5-6).

## III. Theory and Method

The research for this study targeted a three-month time frame between April 1, 2010, and June 30, 2010. Communications from the Catholic Church were taken from the official Vatican and USCCB websites (vatican.va and usccb.org, respectively), with special attention paid to news subsidies released through these two websites during the time frame. News subsidies are defined, for purposes of this research, as textual documents, such as press releases or written messages, which comprise the Catholic Church's self-repre-

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sentation. The study examined news releases issued by the USCCB and written papal proclamations and messages disseminated by the Vatican between April and June. In all, this study examined 66 USCCB news releases and 11 Vatican news subsidies. The primary focus is on textual aspects of coverage; analysis does not include streaming video or audio clips.

Because it is important to not simply understand *what* these organizations say, but also *how* these organizations say what they say, the qualitative method of discourse analysis was used to analyze the data gathered in this study. This research does not deal with coding or counting the language used in the official communications of the Catholic Church. Instead, this study focuses on understanding the meaning behind the language. Content analysis (the '*what*' approach) looks only at common words used within the articles of interest. While this approach is beneficial in some ways, it does not allow one to "associate the documents with conceptual and theoretical issues" (Altheide, 1996, p. 43). In discourse analysis (the '*how*' approach), "similar words are less important than meaningful patterns that are often apparent in context and relevance to another course of action, which may not even appear in one's notes with the same wording" (Altheide, 1996, p. 43).

Narrative analysis is a qualitative research method that emphasizes "stories" told by the subject matter being studied to see how people "impose order on the flow of experience to make sense of events and actions in their lives" (Riessman, 1993, p. 2). These stories are discoveries which lend themselves to a greater understanding of how people make sense of the various textual messages and apply meaning to them based on their prior experiences or in the context of their own worldview. Narrative analysis allows a researcher to identify patterns, themes, and discourses based on these stories and uncover a deeper meaning that is not always readily evident through quantitative research methods.

The study examines such patterns by developing a rubric to analyze Catholic Church news subsidies. Following a qualitative study protocol developed by David Altheide (1996), categories (variables) were identified which then guided data collection. Once these categories were identified, news subsidies were coded and sorted by themes or "distinctive characteristics" (Altheide, 1996, p. 44). These characteristics were then used to identify the four major Church narratives discussed in this research paper.

The coding rubric is integral to the narrative analysis and is used to categorize the Church news subsidies and develop the narratives that emerge from the analysis. The rubric also incorporates two communications theories: framing theory and agenda-setting theory. Framing is the idea that people's decisions can be affected or influenced by the way in which information is presented ("Framing explained"). Agenda-setting, developed by Maxwell McCombs and Donald Shaw, theorizes that the media, through the selection, promotion, and repetition of particular news topics, play an influential role in the formation of public opinion. "Over time, the issues emphasized in news reports become the issues regarded as most important among the public. The agenda of the news media becomes, to a considerable degree, the agenda of the public" (McCombs, 2004, p. 2). In this case, this study examines the Church's agenda based on its official online communications. These theories, along with the narrative analysis method, will be used to guide this study.

## IV. Church Narratives Identified

An analysis of 77 USCCB and Vatican subsidies from the three-month time period between April 1, 2010, and June 30, 2010, yielded four major narratives the Catholic Church in the United States espouses. The USCCB in particular stressed the important role the Church plays in reforming current political and social policies. The coding and analysis of USCCB and Vatican news subsidies revealed the largest topic of concern the Church in America seeks to address in its official communication is respect for human life.

### ***Narrative #1: The Catholic Church places emphasis on social reform that advances the Church's teaching on the universal right to, sacredness of, and respect for human life.***

Narrative #1 earned top priority in Pope Benedict's Easter 2010 message, *Urbi et Orbi* (Latin for "To the City and to the World"), in which the Holy Father prayed for peace around the world and an alleviation of suffering. His speech addressed nearly every continent, first praying "that in the Middle East, and especially in the land sanctified by his death and resurrection, the peoples will accomplish a true and definitive 'exodus' from war and violence to peace and concord" (Benedict XVI, 2010). He gave particular attention to Christians

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in Iraq, surrounded and affected by both political and religious conflict. The pope then cited the drug trafficking problems in Latin America and the Caribbean, extended his condolences to the peoples of Haiti and Chile, and concluded with prayers for an end to the atrocities in Africa, citing the nations where genocide is practiced. To have been the central subject of the pope's Easter address denotes the heavy emphasis the Catholic Church places on universal human rights and on the life and dignity of the human person.

Based on the research, immigration and abortion received the most attention of any issues related to the protection of the dignity and value of the human person. The USCCB's stance on immigration revolved around the passage of Arizona Law SB1070 "which already requires aliens (non-citizens) to register and carry their documents with them" (Camarota, 2010). This new law "simply states that violating federal immigration law is now a state crime as well" and that illegal immigrants "can now be arrested by local law enforcement in Arizona" (Camarota, 2010). The bill has received majority support among Arizona citizens, with 70 percent of the state population in favor of the law. The passage of this law, however, has ignited much controversy among the Catholic community. In an April 28, 2010, news release, Bishop John C. Wester of Salt Lake City, Utah, expressed his displeasure with the new law, calling it "symptomatic of the absence of federal leadership on the issue of immigration" ("USCCB Migration Chairman," 2010). In a May 10, 2010, news release, Catholic bishops conveyed the concerns regarding Law SB1070, which they had addressed at the Catholic Cultural Diversity Network Convocation 2010 at the University of Notre Dame, writing, "This is a law which undermines the fabric of society by creating an atmosphere of discrimination against certain members of the community, profiling minorities and creating fear among persons of color regardless of their immigration status" ("Leaders at Cultural Diversity Convocation," 2010). On May 11, shortly after the letter was published, the USCCB issued a news release announcing the partnership between its committee on Migration and Refugee Services and the Catholic University of America to develop a website that would educate publics about the role of the Church in immigration reform and its related issues. The site intends to provide students, faculty, and researchers with the information and tools necessary for a well-informed understanding of the topic from a Church perspective.

Abortion emerged as another major theme and was frequently raised in conjunction with health care reform. The pro-life agenda was prevalent in documents addressed to Congress, indicating the importance of this issue to the Church and its relevance to and potential impact on American society. Since the 1973 Supreme Court case of *Roe v. Wade*, which legalized abortion in the United States, the Catholic Church has aggressively campaigned to reverse the decision through political and social action. On May 20, the USCCB published a letter written by Cardinal Daniel DiNardo of the USCCB's Committee on Pro-Life Activities on its website. The letter urged Congress to support H.R. 5111, a new bipartisan bill that would bring a recently passed government act "into line with policies on abortion and conscience rights that have long prevailed in other federal health programs" ("Bishops Urge Congress," 2010). DiNardo added that the bishops would continue to advocate for "a reformed health care system that respects the life, health and conscience of all" ("Bishops Urge Congress," 2010). The following day, the USCCB issued another news release reiterating its commitment to promoting the interests of all, attempting to assuage concerns that the Church would compromise to achieve certain goals, saying, "We will never cease to advocate for everyone, beginning with the most needy ... Our vision of the common good embraces the good for each and every member without exception, beginning with those who are weakest and most vulnerable" ("Bishops Note Way Forward," 2010).

The USCCB continued to address the United States Senate on the abortion issue in a June 29 letter, also posted online, in which Cardinal Dinardo asked for the removal of a bill that would provide authorization for elective abortions in military hospitals worldwide. The bill, the cardinal argued, would pose a moral dilemma to Catholic health care workers forced to choose between their professional duties and their religious convictions. The letter also indicates the government's historically pro-life stance and cites the departure from that pattern that this amendment would entail. DiNardo added, "It was disingenuous to suggest, as the amendment's proponents have, that the amendment is 'moderate' in requiring patients at military facilities to pay for their abortions" ("Bishops Urge Senate," 2010). Immigration and abortion thus emerged as the two largest sub-narratives of the Church's emphasis on social reform that values and protects human life.

### ***Narrative #2: The Catholic Church engages in social justice works around the world and calls upon Catholics and non-Catholics alike to do the same in accordance with Catholic social teaching.***

The Catholic Church has long espoused for social justice before its inclusion in the *Catechism of the*

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*Catholic Church*, the official written texts that spell out the teachings of the Church. Social justice, a major component of Catholic social teaching, plays an influential role in the Catholic Church's mission of disseminating the message of Christ worldwide. Research and analysis of USCCB and Vatican news subsidies yielded social justice as a second major narrative.

On April 1, 2010, the USCCB's Subcommittee on the Church in Latin America announced its donation of a \$280,000 grant to the recently earthquake-stricken Chile. The magnitude 8.8 earthquake struck the South American nation in early March, leaving hundreds dead and more than 1.5 million people displaced (Barrionuevo and Robbins, 2010). The quake also damaged a number of Chilean churches, leaving nearly one million Catholics without a place to worship. Partnering with Aid to the Church in Need, "an international Catholic charity under the guidance of the Holy Father" ("USCCB Reaches Out," 2010), the USCCB Subcommittee helped supply a total of 35 temporary chapels for the affected Chilean parishes. In addition to the funding provided for the temporary chapels, the USCCB Subcommittee also set aside \$50,000 for the Church in Chile to support its various pastoral projects. The Subcommittee also planned to visit the country at a later date to document the relief efforts and determine if further assistance was needed.

One week later, on April 8, 2010, the USCCB issued another news release about earthquake relief efforts, except this time the country making headlines was Haiti. January 12, 2010, saw the Caribbean nation hit by a magnitude 7.0 quake, leaving between 200,000 and 250,000 dead and damages ranging from \$7.2 billion to \$13.2 billion (New York Times, 2010). The next day, U.S. bishops began organizing a massive fundraising campaign to help rebuild Haiti. In less than three months, the Collection for Haiti campaign had raised \$58.7 million from parishes across America. According to the news release, "Outside the special collection, generous support of more than \$60 million also has gone directly to CRS from individuals, groups, colleges, foundations and corporations" ("Catholics Donate," 2010), totaling \$120 million in donations. The actions of the Church in the wake of the natural disasters in Chile and Haiti offer evidence to its commitment of enacting social justice in areas of the world where the need is greatest.

On May 5, 2010, the USCCB issued a news release applauding the actions of Congress for introducing a new bill, the Haiti Economic Lift Program Act of 2010, which sought to increase trade preferences with Haiti. Bishop Howard J. Hubbard of Albany, New York, expressed gratitude for Congress's actions on this matter, noting that the passage of this legislation would lead to the creation of thousands of jobs, increased confidence among investors and retailers, and an overall improvement in the quality of life of the Haitian people.

On June 1, 2010, the USCCB issued a news release promoting Peter's Pence, a collection that supports the works of the Holy Father. The theme, drawn from the 2009 papal encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* (Latin for "In Charity and Truth"), was "Cast the love of Christ upon the world," citing the love of God as the source of people's kindness and good works (Peter's Pence Collection," 2010). According to the release, "offerings to the collection support church needs, humanitarian initiatives (such as aid of victims of war, oppression and natural disasters) and other human promotion projects around the world" ("Peter's Pence Collection," 2010). The USCCB planned the special collection for this ministry across America for the weekend of June 26-27; the news release sought to publicize the mission and purpose of the collection.

On June 15, 2010, the USCCB issued a news release detailing the efforts of the Catholic Campaign for Human Development, or CCHD, in the wake of the BP Deepwater Horizon disaster. The CCHD raised \$300,000 for those primarily affected by the oil spill, offering "concrete support to the work that must be done to help these communities help themselves" ("Catholic Campaign for Human Development," 2010). A day later, on June 16, the USCCB issued another news release calling for Catholics to pray for those who died in the oil rig explosion, as well as for those reliant on the gulf for their economic well-being. The USCCB's YouTube channel featured a video message from Bishop Kevin Boland, promoter of the Apostleship by the Sea, which was uploaded on the same day as the news release. Boland offered his condolences for the victims of the disaster before citing *Caritas in Veritate* in his speech, saying "the way humanity treats the environment influences the way it treats itself, and vice versa" ("A Message from Bishop Boland, Bishop Promoter of the Apostleship of the Sea (AOS)," 2010). Bishop Boland's words are evidence the Church believes the environment is an issue of social justice that both Catholics and non-Catholics should seek to address.

While the USCCB illustrated the importance of social justice and its application through various charitable operations of the Church, the Vatican made no explicit mention of the issue during the three-month time frame. Instead, the USCCB established a connection between the Vatican and the Church narrative on social justice by frequently citing Pope Benedict's *Caritas in Veritate*, which outlines the Church's social doctrine, specifically regarding "justice and the common good" (2009). The themes of the encyclical, charity and truth,

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are prevalent throughout the numerous USCCB news releases on social justice. It may be determined, therefore, that the social justice narrative, in fact, serves as a vehicle for the larger themes of love and truth the Church hopes to promote.

### ***Narrative #3: The Catholic Church encourages interfaith dialogue and embraces cultural diversity.***

The Catholic Church is at times referred to as “the universal Church.” Indeed, the word “catholic” comes from the Greek word *katholikos*, meaning “throughout the whole” or “universal” (Catholic Encyclopedia, 2009). Closely related to this idea, the Church’s commitment to advancing both interfaith dialogue and cultural diversity emerged as a third narrative, reflected in the USCCB and Vatican media subsidies analyzed in the April-June time frame.

On April 15, 2010, the USCCB released a media advisory promoting an event on the issue of cultural diversity, scheduled for May 6-8 at the University of Notre Dame. The gathering of more than 300 participants, including dozens of Church leaders, were convening to “advance ... recognition of cultural diversity in the Church; foster a strong Catholic identity and greater unity in diversity in the Church” (“Media Credentialing,” 2010), and to mark the tenth anniversary of Encuentro 2000, a celebration of multiculturalism and religious unity in the United States. The USCCB issued a press release on May 3, 2010, again promoting the event. Jesuit Father Allan Figueroa Deck was cited, saying, “Intercultural communication and relationships are more important than ever for the Church in our country. Today these relationships provide a key for the Church’s growth and vitality as one Body in Christ” (“Unity in Diversity,” 2010).

Archbishop Wilton B. Gregory of Atlanta maintained the emphasis on spiritual unity in his address to the Cultural Diversity Network Convocation on May 7. The speech was featured in a May 10 news release on the USCCB website. In his address, Archbishop Gregory noted how society often attempts to recognize diversity through an artificial means, namely by seeking to “minimize the uniqueness and distinctiveness of people” (“Archbishop Gregory,” 2010). The goal of the Catholic Church, he posited, should reflect exactly the opposite. Gregory said, “We are most Catholic when we reflect our oneness of faith and worship that is achieved in response to our rich mixture of human variety through the grace of the Holy Spirit” (“Archbishop Gregory,” 2010).

Interfaith dialogue, as mentioned earlier, was another major focus of the USCCB during the time frame. Twice the USCCB met with Muslim leaders, the first on May 5-6 in New Jersey and the second on May 19-20 in California. The USCCB highlighted the conferences in news releases issued on May 17, 2010, and June 1, 2010, respectively. At the first meeting, influential members of both the Muslim and Catholic communities discussed interreligious education and the danger of stereotypes. Dr. Talat Sultan of the Islamic Circle of North America, or ICNA, noted that “before people teach about other religions, they should use primary sources to correctly understand other faiths” (“Mid-Atlantic Catholic-Muslim Dialogue,” 2010). Members then collectively voiced concerns about inaccurate portrayals of their religions in the media, which both parties agreed were a major factor in shaping the negative attitudes about Islam and Catholicism in American culture. The two groups adopted a statement, vowing “to work for mutual understanding between their two faith traditions, to support one another in confronting negative stereotypes in all media, [and] to work with the leaders of their congregations in this effort” (“Mid-Atlantic Catholic-Muslim Dialogue,” 2010). The second meeting sought to compare a sacred text found within both the Christian and Muslim traditions. Catholic and Muslim leaders agreed that the two similar narratives, titled “The Seven Sleepers of Ephesus” in Christian texts and Al-Kahf (“The Cave”) in Surah 18:21 of the Qur’an, the holy book of Islam, “reveal God’s care for the young men who remained faithful” (“West Coast Catholic-Muslim Dialogue,” 2010).

In addition to enhancing its relationship with the Muslim community, the Catholic Church also worked to connect with those of the Jewish tradition, whom Pope John Paul referred to as “our elder brothers” (Cunningham, 2010) and whom Pope Benedict called “our fathers in the faith” (Moynihan, 2010). On May 19, 2010, the USCCB issued a news release documenting a Jewish-Catholic Dialogue held in New York a week earlier. The semi-annual consultation sought to understand the growing religious trends among youth members of their respective faiths based on the findings of the Pew Forum’s U.S. Religious Landscape Survey, conducted in 2008. Among its discoveries, the survey revealed that only 35 percent of American Catholics between the ages of 18-49 attend worship services on a weekly basis, while attendance is only 20 percent of American Jews in the same age bracket (Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, 2008, p. 38). Representatives from both sides agreed that the younger generations of religious people in America “perceive institutionalized

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religion as ‘alien, bland, coercive and divisive’” and that, if these members are to be retained, these institutions must devise ways to approach and address these young people outside of traditional worship settings (“Jewish-Catholic Dialogue,” 2010).

The Vatican also showed support for its Jewish brethren through its commemoration of the birthday of a former chief rabbi. On May 3, 2010, Pope Benedict extended his well-wishing to Rabbi Emeritus Rav Elio Toaff of Rome, who was celebrating his 95th birthday. The pope referred to Psalm 23 on several occasions, a biblical passage penned by King David, who wrote of his relationship with and the good will of the Lord. The Holy Father cites the Holocaust as the “darkest valley” in the history of the Jews, but that God was there to guide the rabbi and his people through this difficult period so that they might “become a sign of hope” for other adherents of Judaism and for humanity (“Message of Greetings,” 2010). In a call for increased dialogue between their two respective religions, Benedict added, “I am especially keen to recall your commitment to promoting fraternal relations between Catholics and Jews, and the sincere friendship that bound you to my venerable Predecessor, Pope John Paul II” (“Message of Greetings,” 2010).

The Catholic Church also emphasizes the need for communication with other Christian denominations. In particular, it seeks closer ties with the Orthodox Church, which separated from the Roman Catholic Church in the Great Schism of 1054, nearly a millennium ago. On June 8, 2010, the USCCB issued a news release detailing a meeting of Church leaders to discuss steps toward uniting the two churches. The consultation met on June 1-3 to draft a statement outlining the historical differences between the two institutions and attempt to discern a course of action that might facilitate their reunification. The document calls such reunification a “matter of urgency” and “reflects on what a reunited Catholic and Orthodox Church might look like, the ecclesial structures needed to facilitate such unity, and the questions that remain to be answered if such a reconciliation is to take place” (“Orthodox-Catholic Consultation,” 2010).

The Vatican also engaged in interfaith dialogue during the time frame, addressing a letter to Buddhists worldwide on the subject of the environment, as mentioned in the Church’s second narrative regarding its emphasis on social justice. The Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue issued the message on the feast of Vesākha, known in the Buddhist tradition as the birthday of Siddhartha Gautama, the founder of Buddhism. The Vatican used this feast as an opportunity to discuss the environmental crisis and ask for help in addressing the problem. The Church, calling upon Buddhists because of their shared “profound respect for human life” (“Message for the Feast of Vesakh/Hanamatsuri,” 2010), hoped that people of both religions could serve as an example of coexistence for the rest of the world. The message, although addressed to Buddhists, was arguably targeted at Christians as well; their participation, although not explicitly requested, is implied. This is a general theme throughout all official Church communication with other religions: all Catholics, regardless of age, race, or vocation, are called to enter into dialogue with people of other faith traditions. This hearkens back to the Church’s belief in the universal respect for and dignity of the human person.

#### ***Narrative #4: The Catholic Church holds its leaders in high esteem, believing they possess authority bestowed upon them by God.***

The fourth and final major narrative that emerged from the research was the authority of the clergy of the Roman Catholic Church. The clergy consists of those men ordained to serve in a religious capacity within the Church. Catholic doctrine holds that Jesus Christ, when founding the Church, also appointed Peter the Apostle to serve as the first pope. “Through Apostolic Succession, that same hierarchy willed by Jesus, exists today in the Church with the Pope (the successor of St. Peter) at her head, leading the Bishops (the successors of the Apostles)” (“The Catholic Church: Hierarchical Structure of the Church,” 2007). In short, today’s clergy represents an unbroken line of Church leaders traced directly back to St. Peter. The Catholic Church’s depiction of the Church clergy as an authoritative body is important, therefore, not simply to illustrate the legitimacy of the hierarchy, but also to remind people of its divine origins.

The hierarchy was given serious attention in the USCCB’s coverage; based on the research coding, the subject that received the highest coverage in the USCCB’s news releases was that of episcopal appointments and resignations (episcopal meaning related to a bishop). The USCCB issued a total of 66 news releases in the three-month time frame. Of those news releases, 15 were the subject of episcopal appointments and/or resignations. From the beginning of April 2010 to the end of June 2010, the USCCB issued news releases marking the appointment of 17 bishops and the resignation of six bishops. All episcopal resignations were received by Pope Benedict. Each of the 15 stories detailing the appointments and resignations provide information on the academic, professional, and vocational backgrounds on the Church official or officials

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mentioned in the article. Eight of the articles feature demographic facts about the diocese where the Church official is assigned, including square mileage, total population of the diocese, and the number and percentage of the population that is Catholic.

The Vatican website also places a major emphasis on the leadership of the Catholic Church, with the pope at its head. Of the 11 news subsidies the Vatican produced during the three-month time frame, five were personally authored by Pope Benedict XVI. Four others were authored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith, a group of 23 cardinals, archbishops, and bishops, as well as 28 consultants, described as “professors in various Roman universities and pontifical faculties who are experts in different ecclesiastical disciplines” (“Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith”). The other two were written by the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue and the Synod of Bishops, which was “set up after Vatican Council II in order to foster the unity and cooperation of bishops around the world with the Holy See” (“Synod of Bishops,” 2011).

On May 10, 2010, Pope Benedict addressed a letter to the second meeting of the Church’s “Kirchentag” (German for “Church congress”) in Munich. In the message, the Holy Father voiced his support for the bishops, citing the motto used by the congress: “So That You Might Have Hope.” The pope added, “This phrase intends first of all to invite us not to lose sight of goodness and of good people. It invites us to be good ourselves and to become good again always” (“Message of His Holiness,” 2010). Furthermore, he pointed to Jesus Christ for encouragement. “We have not been left alone. God is living. God loves us. In Jesus Christ he became one of us. I can turn to him and he will listen to me” (“Message of His Holiness,” 2010). The pope’s message illustrates the belief that God, too, supports the efforts of the “Kirchentag” and, in a larger sense, the Catholic Church and its efforts to bring the faith to the world.

On May 21, 2010, the Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith released a letter notifying bishops around the world of a revision regarding the norms *de gravioribus delictis* (“grave delicts”), or the rules governing the proper treatment of serious offenses committed by members of the clergy (e.g., clerical child sex abuse). The letter intimated that bishops should review the changes made to the norms and ensure the priests and other members of the religious community of their respective dioceses were alerted of the changes as well. In addition to its publication as a likely response to the sex abuse scandal, which will be explored further in Chapter IV, the letter looked to provide members of the Church hierarchy with an alert to updates made to Church policy regarding sex abuse cases.

## V. Discussion

Addressing the research question, the Roman Catholic Church represents itself as a benevolent theological institution with strong ties to Jesus Christ and his messages. The four major Church narratives developed after an analysis of the USCCB and Vatican news subsidies indicated the Church’s commitment to spreading the Word of God throughout the world by charitable means and evangelical outreach. The Church’s mission and messages, however, were overshadowed in large part by unfavorable representations of the Church in secular news media. The sex abuse scandal, unveiled as a global problem and not one restricted to the United States as previously believed, dealt serious damage to the reputation of the institutional Church and its members. In response, the Church has taken steps to address this issue, appointing new bishops and priests to replace those who had a hand in the sex abuse scandal, resulting in a cleansing of sorts in the ranks of the Church. The Roman Catholic Church is now committed to new approaches that look to restore its integrity and regain the trust of those who have since abandoned hope in the institution.

Despite a more transparent approach, the Church needs a way to infiltrate the mainstream discourse and promote its agenda on a more frequent and consistent basis. The Church makes a great many positive contributions in the world, as evidenced through the four narratives highlighted in this study. Its challenge is to find and project its voice amid the noise and clutter of a society already oversaturated and influenced by media messages. The Roman Catholic Church faces numerous obstacles and threats in this modern world, but an institution that has lasted nearly 2,000 years and encountered more than its fair share of crises and struggles is far from finished.

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## **Limitations**

This study was conducted as part of an undergraduate honors thesis, which is structured as a two-year academic program. The limited time frame was a prime factor in the number of media subsidies collected and analyzed. The thesis, in addition to the 77 Church news subsidies analyzed, examined 281 articles from three major traditional online news sites—*USAToday.com*, *NYTimes.com*, and *Washingtonpost.com*. A study concentrated solely on Church subsidies and narratives has the possibility of yielding even more in-depth results and conclusions. Furthermore, the three-month time frame from April to June 2010 is a limitation in that it selects only a short time period to examine. The major Church narratives that existed during this time period are likely very different if examining a separate or larger time period. Lastly, the main researcher's faith background as an actively practicing Catholic may present a limitation to this thesis. It is possible that, despite the researcher's best efforts to remain unbiased throughout the study, some areas of the research are prone to a slight degree of partiality in one direction or another.

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