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Report on the international scientific conference  
*Relevance and listening: communicating  
the Christian message in the plurality  
of contemporary voices*, organised by  
the Department of Institutional Social  
Communication of the Pontifical University of  
the Holy Cross, Rome, May 2-4, 2023

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Rafał Leśniczak has a post-doctoral degree in social sciences in the discipline of social communication and media science (University of Maria Curie-Skłodowska 2020), he is an associate professor and head of the Department of Social Communication, Public Relations and New Media at the Institute of Media Education and Journalism at the Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University in Warsaw. He is the author of over 90 scientific publications in the field of media, religion and politics. His research interests focus on political communication, mediatization and public relations. He is currently a member of European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR), and the Polish Communication Association (PTKS).

**Keywords:** Catholic Church; listening; public relations; relevance; social communication

**Abstract:** From 2 to 4 May 2023 an international scientific conference entitled “Relevance and listening: communicating the Christian message in the plurality of contemporary voices” was held in Rome. The meeting was organised by the Department of Institutional Social Communication of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. The aim of the conference was to analyse the challenges related to the proper understanding and implementation of institutional communication processes of ecclesiastical institutions in the perspective of the contemporary socio-political and cultural context. The conference’s main speakers were, among others, Prof. Jim Macnamara (University of Technology of Sydney), Prof. José María La Porte (Pontificia Università della Santa Croce), Prof. Benedetto Ippolito (Università Roma Tre) and Prof. Lorenzo Cantoni (Università della Svizzera Italiana).

From 2 to 4 May 2023 an international scientific conference entitled “Relevance and listening: communicating the Christian message in the plurality of contemporary voices” was held in Rome. The meeting was organised by the Department of Institutional Social Communication (*School of Church Communication*) of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross in Rome. The seminar was addressed to the representatives of the academic world, researchers of institutional communication, employees of church press offices and spokespersons of church institutions, as well as media experts dealing with the area of public relations and crisis management.

In the invitation to the conference participants, its organisers diagnosed the context and contemporary challenges for church press offices as follows:

*Debates involving public opinion generate a plurality of voices, which in part enrich dialogue and in part produce confusion and tension, since the proposed solutions rarely leave space for those who think differently. (...) The Church’s communications offices are faced with the challenge of broadening the debate so as not to get trapped in preconceptions that only reinforce certain stereotypes and prevent issues from being addressed in their full scope. In times of social change, one’s identity is put to the test. In crises or rapid transformations, one is often unable to discern and clearly identify core values. Communicators can help those in charge of institutions highlight the essentials of their message and, when necessary, drive the necessary changes to be faithful to their mission. The role of the communicator is fundamental in **listening to different opinions** and introducing serenity in the debate. A good communicator will take great care in choosing the language to express the core identity of the institution and call to mind its mission (13th Professional Seminar for Church Communications Offices, 2023).*

In addition to the main topic of the meeting, the discussion of the conference participants was focused, among others, on the following subtopics: polarisation and hate speech, cultural debate and social conflict, relevance and communication of faith, leadership and internal communication, new communication proposals: webs, podcasts, social networks and other digital channels.

Over three days, the conference was attended by over 80 speakers representing over 30 countries, including the United States, Philippines, Mexico, Great Britain, Nigeria, Singapore, Switzerland and Austria. The conference proceedings were also attended by about 130 students and graduates of the Faculty of Social Communication and 35 academic teachers of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. The conference work included papers in the main panel, in six thematic sections, as well as an audience with Pope Francis in St. Peter's Square and a meeting with the employees of the Holy See's Communication Dicastery. The official languages of the congress were English, Spanish and Italian (with simultaneous translation).

The conference began on 2 May, 2023, with Welcome words by Prof. Luis Navarro, Rector of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross. The Rector expressed his conviction that the participants of the conference came with many questions, ideas and reflections, and thanks to the deliberations, they will be able to organise them and give a new impetus to their work. In turn, the Dean of the Faculty, Prof. Daniel Arasa highlighted the main goal of the professional seminar: the importance of acquiring communication competences, proper listening and the accuracy of the broadcast message in the context of changing cultural and social circumstances in which ecclesial institutions fulfil their mission. He also noted that the cyclical conference dedicated to communicating among church institutions takes place in a stationary mode after a 5-year break caused by the pandemic.

On the first day of the meeting, the main panel presented their papers, among others: Prof. José María La Porte (Pontificia Università della Santa Croce) and Prof. Benedetto Ippolito (Università Roma Tre). In his paper entitled "Rebirth from One's Identity in a Secularized Context", Professor La Porte addressed the subject of the social, media and cultural context of journalistic work. The Spanish researcher noticed that contemporary quality journalism must constantly care about high work standards (the principle of truth and objectivity) and confront the culture of fake news. In the context of the dynamic development of technology, Prof. La Porte noted the importance of media education: "The truth is of no interest to today's society, everything has been left to subjectivity. That's why we have to ask ourselves who we trust in the digital world". The lecture by Prof. Ippolito was an attempt to answer the question whether Christian culture can still inspire a "tired" society, i.e. a society living in the culture of postmodernism, post-truth and neo-globalisation. The Italian researcher of the history of philosophy has made an analysis of contemporary European civilisation that essentially reduces the anthropological perspective to a natural and rational path of consciousness. Prof.

Ippolito, referring to the thought of the Fathers of the Church, stated that Christian culture has its summit in charity, in the love of God. He also invoked the thought of Pope Francis included in the encyclical *Fratelli tutti*, who calls for rediscover the importance of truth as the parameter of our personal, family and social life.

It is worth noting the presentation of Dr. Martin Kugler, a member of the Observatory of Intolerance and Discrimination Against Christians in Europe, as part of the panel “Amidst Polarisation, standing with the Vulnerable”. The Austrian expert noted that a great challenge and opportunity for the institutional communication of the Church lies in understanding and appropriately referring to the dominant media narratives. The communication strategy should not be about escaping difficult questions but rather about the need to present them honestly and competently.

On the second day of the conference, its participants had the opportunity to meet members of the Dicastery for Communication and listen to a paper by its prefect Paolo Ruffini, entitled “The Role of the Dicastery in the Synodal Listening Process”. The communication expert noted that the concept of synodality of Pope Francis and the process of institutional communication should be treated as complementary. In the opinion of Ruffini, communication not only broadens knowledge about synodality but also serves in formation in synodality, i.e. “to build the synodal communion of a people that communicates through its two-way communication” (Ruffini, 2023). This lecture was attended by, among others:

- Lucio Ruiz, Secretary of the Dicastery;
- Andrea Tornielli, Italian writer and journalist;
- Nataša Govekar, director of the Department of Pastoral Theology in the Vatican’s Dicastery for Communication and the Dicastery’s representative for SIGNIS (World Catholic Association for Communication, a non-governmental organisation that includes members from over 100 countries);
- Andrea Monda, Italian journalist and writer, editor-in-chief of *L’Osservatore Romano*;
- Matteo Bruni, Director of the Press Office of the Holy See.

Also, on the second day of the meeting, Prof. Daniel Arasa presented two new publications on Joaquín Navarro-Valls – the historical director of the Holy See Press Office at the time of John Paul II and Benedict XVI. The first book written in Spanish, *Mis años con Juan Pablo II*, edited by Prof. Diego Contreras, was based on the memoirs and personal notes of Navarro-Valls, which the author wished to be published after his death. The second book, *The Spokesman Behind Saint John Paul II: Professional Memories of Navarro-Valls’ Friends and Colleagues*, by Rafael Navarro-Valls and José María La Porte, introduced the Holy See’s long-time press officer.

Prof. Jim Macnamara (University of Technology of Sydney), in the panel entitled “Meeting the challenge of being a listening organization,” drew attention to “listening” as the most effective dimension of communication. The serious errors in this area have consequences in the way the institution functions and in relations with external stakeholders, i.e. they contribute to a progressive decline in trust in the organisation and withdrawal of stakeholders. According to the Australian researcher, the proper culture of an organisation is expressed in the will and ability to listen to subordinates by the management of the organisation, and what is important, modern technologies, although they can help in listening, will not replace face-to-face meetings. Research by Prof. Macnamara proves that the right “listening architecture” results in employee loyalty, retention and high productivity, increased innovation, as well as increased reputation and trust in the organisation.

On the third day of the conference, Prof. Lorenzo Cantoni’s lecture (Università della Svizzera Italiana) entitled “Listening and Relevance: Paying attention, Understanding, Being Understood” was of particular interest. For Cantoni, the measure of the effectiveness of communication is dialogue and cooperation, as well as the relationship between the speaker and the listener. The media expert emphasised the importance of communicative competence, the art of silence and a good attitude towards the speaker. In turn, in the lecture “Regaining the initiative to become relevant,” Prof. Juan Manuel Mora (Pontificia Università della Santa Croce) presented the results of a research in the area of the importance of the intangible value of relevance for the communication of organisations, in particular for the communication of the Catholic Church.

In addition, the following media researchers delivered papers in the plenary sessions: Prof. Yago de la Cierva (IESE Business School), Prof. Maria José Canel (Universidad Complutense de Madrid), Prof. Marcela Pizarro (Universidad Austral), Mónica Herrero (Universidad de Navarra) and Guido Gili (Università degli Studi del Molise).

The Polish media experts who presented the results of their research at the conference in Rome included:

- Waldemar Bartocha from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (“Religious communication of the Polish Bishops Conference and the diocesan bishops during the coronavirus pandemic in the media discourse and in the light of the analysis of selected Mass transmissions”);
- Mariusz Boguszewski from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (“L’immagine delle organizzazioni umanitarie ecclesiastiche polacche nel contesto di guerra in Ucraina”);
- Paulina Guzik from the Pontifical University of John Paul II (“Turning scandals into opportunities – Lessons learnt listening to survivors of clerical sexual abuse”);
- Michał Kłosowski, Deputy Editor In Chief of the *Wszystko Co Najważniejsze* (“Saint John Paul II and the 21st century Youths. The Polish case”);

- Rafał Leśniczak from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (“Political communication of the Polish Bishops’ Conference after Russia’s invasion of Ukraine in 2022”);
- Krzysztof Stępnik from Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University (“Religion in the discourse of religious and atheistic advertising: the sacred and profane”);
- Piotr Studnicki from the Pontifical University of John Paul II (“Raccontare la propria versione di una crisi. Discussione sulla credibilità”).

The Pontifical University of the Holy Cross established the School of Church Communications in 1996 to prepare communication professionals for ecclesial institutions. PUSC’s social communication study program covers four main areas:

- the nature of communication and the elements upon which it is based (the processes of shaping public opinion, the structure of information-based entities and the language of the traditional means of communication, as well as the new technology-based media);
- the Church in a cultural context;
- the theological, philosophical and canonical content of the faith and its impact on the identity of the Church as an institution;
- the organisation of communications offices, methods of communicating with the various interlocutors of the Church and the presentation of the content of the faith in the field of public opinion (Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, 2023).

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**Raport z międzynarodowej konferencji naukowej: *Znaczenie a słuchanie: przekazywanie chrześcijańskiego przesłania przy mnogości współczesnych głosów* [*Relevance and listening: communicating the Christian message in the plurality of contemporary voices*], zorganizowanej przez Wydział Instytucjonalnej Komunikacji Społecznej Papieskiego Uniwersytetu Świętego Krzyża w Rzymie, 2-4 maja, 2023**

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Rafał Leśniczak jest doktorem habilitowanym nauk społecznych w dyscyplinie nauki o komunikacji społecznej i mediach (Uniwersytet Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej 2020), jest profesorem uczelni i kierownikiem Katedry Komunikacji Społecznej, Public Relations i Nowych Mediów w Instytucie Edukacji Medialnej i Dziennikarstwa Uniwersytetu Kardynała Stefana Wyszyńskiego w Warszawie. Jest autorem ponad 90 publikacji naukowych z zakresu mediów, religii i polityki. Jego zainteresowania badawcze koncentrują się na komunikacji politycznej, mediatyzacji i public relations. Obecnie jest członkiem European Communication Research and Education Association (ECREA), International Association

for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) oraz Polskiego Towarzystwa Komunikacji Społecznej (PTKS).

**S**łowa kluczowe: Kościół katolicki; słuchanie; public relations; znaczenie; komunikacja społeczna

**S**treszczenie: W dniach 2-4 maja 2023 r. w Rzymie odbyła się międzynarodowa konferencja naukowa pt. „Znaczenie a słuchanie: przekazywanie Chrześcijańskiego przesłania przy mnogości współczesnych głosów”. Spotkanie zostało zorganizowane przez Katedrę Instytucjonalnej Komunikacji Społecznej Papieskiego Uniwersytetu Świętego Krzyża w Rzymie. Celem konferencji była analiza wyzwań związanych z właściwym zrozumieniem i realizacją procesów komunikacji instytucjonalnej instytucji kościelnych w perspektywie współczesnego kontekstu społeczno-politycznego i kulturowego. Głównymi prelegentami konferencji byli m.in. prof. Jim Macnamara (University of Technology of Sydney), prof. José María La Porte (Pontificia Università della Santa Croce), prof. Benedetto Ippolito (Università Roma Tre) oraz prof. Lorenzo Cantoni (Università della Svizzera Italiana).



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**Bericht zur internationalen wissenschaftlichen  
Tagung „Relevance and listening: communicating  
the Christian message in the plurality  
of contemporary voices“ („Relevanz und  
Zuhören: Die Vermittlung der christlichen  
Botschaft durch die Vielzahl zeitgenössischer  
Stimmen“), veranstaltet durch den Lehrstuhl  
für Institutionelle Soziale Kommunikation der  
Päpstlichen Universität Santa Croce in Rom,  
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Rafał Leśniczak ist Habildoktor der Sozialwissenschaften im Bereich Sozialkommunikation und Medien (Maria-Curie-Skłodowska-Universität 2020), außerordentlicher Professor und Leiter des Lehrstuhls für Sozialkommunikation, Public Relations und Neue Medien am Institut für Medienpädagogik und Journalismus an der Kardinal-Stefan-Wyszyński-Universität Warschau, Polen. Er ist Autor von über 90 wissenschaftlichen Veröffentlichungen zu den Themen Medien, Religion und Politik. Seine Forschungsinteressen konzentrieren sich auf politische Kommunikation, Medialisierung und Public Relations. Derzeit ist er Mitglied der Vereinigungen European Communication Research and Education

Association (EUREA), International Association for Media and Communication Research (IAMCR) und der Polnischen Gesellschaft für Sozialkommunikation (Polskie Towarzystwo Komunikacji Społecznej – PTKS).

**S** **chlüsselworte:** katholische Kirche; Zuhörer; Public Relations; Relevanz; soziale Kommunikation

**Z** **usammenfassung:** In den Tagen vom 2. bis 4. Mai 2023 fand in Rom eine internationale wissenschaftliche Tagung zum Thema „Relevance and listening: communicating the Christian message in the plurality of contemporary voices“ („Relevanz und Zuhören: Die Kommunikation der christlichen Botschaft inmitten der Vielfalt zeitgenössischer Stimmen“) statt. Die Tagung wurde vom Lehrstuhl für Institutionelle Soziale Kommunikation der Päpstlichen Universität Santa Croce in Rom organisiert. Das Ziel der Tagung war die Analyse der Herausforderungen im Zusammenhang mit dem angemessenen Verständnis und der Umsetzung von Prozessen institutioneller Kommunikation kirchlicher Einrichtungen im Kontext der zeitgenössischen sozio-politischen und kulturellen Realität. Zu den Hauptrednern der Konferenz gehörten unter anderem Prof. Jim Macnamara (Technologische Universität in Sydney / University of Technology Sydney), Prof. José María La Porte (Päpstliche Universität Santa Croce / Pontificia Università della Santa Croce), Prof. Benedetto Ippolito (Universität Rom III / Università Roma Tre) und Prof. Lorenzo Cantoni (Universität der Italienischen Schweiz / Università della Svizzera Italiana).