A university crisis provoked by an online class: a communications case study on a social media turbulence

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ABSTRACT

In 2020, a Latin American university with a Catholic ethos suffered a crisis when the content of an online class on bioethics regarding homosexuality was posted on Twitter. This communications case study – in which names have been altered to protect confidentiality – describes the objective and subjective circumstances of the case, how the problem evolved, how different stakeholders reacted, and what the University did in order to cope with the crisis. It also narrates what the University did in the post-crisis period to prevent something similar from happening again. The study concludes with a brief analysis of the main takeaways that this case could offer to University authorities and, in general, to managers and communicators in Church-related institutions.

Introduction

Objectives and methodology

Case studies are an indispensable tool in teaching managerial skills. They allow people to put themselves into someone else’s shoes, feel the same personal tension due to the risks involved and to the uncertainty regarding the effectiveness of their decisions.

Every crisis is as unique as a fingerprint, but at the same time problems evolve in very similar ways and people tend to react in patterns. Thanks to this it is possible to extract good practices that are valid for other situations.

For this reason, a case study is quite often a better training tool for managers than a theoretical analysis of a subject or a practical list of dos and don’ts. Case studies force managers to take action and, later on, consider the results of their decisions under pressure.

The usual problem is confidentiality. It is not an easy decision for organizations to release full information about a crisis they have suffered. The negative effects due to the crisis are damaging enough without adding, for no apparent reason, an unnecessary
supplement of institutional and personal embarrassment. That’s why companies rarely release confidential information.

A frequent compromise between being transparent in showing mistakes and, at the same time, contributing to the advance of managers’ and communicators’ professional training is to reveal an edited account of the events, in which the most glaring errors have been omitted. Readers get a whiff of what really happened, but unfortunately, doctored versions are never as useful as the real facts.

In order to maximize readers’ learning, the authors of this study have decided to tell the full story with all the nitty-gritty details while protecting privacy by altering names and places, and slightly modifying characters and context to avoid recognition. Despite these changes, the essence of the problem and its consequences remain unaltered.

The present article is divided into three parts. Part I describes the institutional, social, religious and communication context. Part II tells the story of a recent digital crisis suffered by a Latin American university: its beginning, how it unfolded, and its closing. Part III analyzes the institutional response and concludes with some recommendations for both managers and communicators that aim to facilitate the decision-making process to reduce risks, improve crisis preparedness and enhance the quality of the institutional response in the midst of a crisis. Finally, some conclusions are offered regarding issues management at universities.

The skills, backgrounds and experience of the authors are very different. One is a PR professional who has worked in the past in communication departments of two different universities, one of them as the head of the division reporting directly to the President. The second combines teaching crisis management and public affairs in a business school with consultancy work. The third is a TV reporter on Church current news and, as a consultant, has advised Church institutions on communication matters and has conducted several media training programs for their spokespeople regarding hot button issues.

We would like to express our gratitude to the University concerned, for approving the publication of this paper, as a contribution to increasing excellence in university management and communication. In our view, this decision is the ultimate manifestation of the University’s true desire to learn from what happened. Sharing this story with other institutions shows a true university spirit – the dissemination of knowledge.

One last caveat before getting into the story. This is a crisis management and communications case. In order to understand the context, we provide basic information about what medical science and Christian morals say about homosexuality, but this is in no way a scientific or a theological case study. We lack the expertise to produce such a document and, more importantly, we have decided to focus our attention on what happens with respect to public perceptions when a university gets involved in a controversy regarding a sensitive issue like homosexuality, so that the top management of institutions involved in similar cases can learn how to take prudent decisions.

The dilemma: a disturbing WhatsApp

It’s Friday morning, and Fabiola (not her real name) is not at the office: the whole country is in lockdown. Her university has been closed for almost ten months, so
everyone, from the President to the most junior professor or manager, has been working remotely. They are working long hours from home on a schedule which is even more intense than in the old routine.

In order to enjoy one of the few perks of this new scenario, Fabiola decided to work in a relaxing environment and, for a couple of days, rented a small apartment near a deserted beach, just a few hours away from the university campus. Hard work, yes, but in style!

This is Fabiola’s fourth year as the communications director of the Universidad de América del Sur (not the real name). She started as an external international consultant, providing a communications audit, but subsequently the university couldn’t find the right person for the job and she remained. Life is good here, so she (almost) does not miss her own country.

In her daily routine, Fabiola checks conversations on social media that may have an impact either on her institution or on university studies generally. Early that morning, she did not find anything ‘interesting’, but a couple of hours later suddenly, something grabs her attention.

The university does not have a paid social media monitoring system, a ‘corporate ear in cyberspace’, as Fabiola calls it. Luckily, several faculty members and other colleagues know of her desire ‘to know all’, and whenever they learn any information on social media that they consider dangerous, inappropriate, or simply interesting, they share it with her.

By 13:10, Fabiola has spent more than 4 h answering dozens of routine emails and decides to take a break. She leaves the terrace overlooking the ocean and enters the kitchen to prepare something light. But when she is about to uncork a prosecco to accompany a rather uninteresting salad, her cell phone buzzes several times, the typical noise of a long series of WhatsApp texts.

As soon as she reads the first one, her blood freezes. It is a screenshot of a PowerPoint slide, with the university logo in the upper right-hand corner, in which homosexuality is compared with perversion, and a connection is drawn between homosexuality and sexual abuse.

The following texts clarify the context: the presentation was used by a professor in his bioethics class, this very morning at the medical school.

This is the kind of information she knows can become a big storm if it is not tackled immediately. ‘Uff, this is going to be a long day’, Fabiola says to herself.

Part I: the context

Universidad América del Sur

Universidad América del Sur (UAS) was founded almost 60 years ago. It comprises three campuses – the main one in the capital city and two more in the country’s most important cities; eight schools; 11,000 undergraduate students; 2000 participants in several postgraduate programs; and a business school with an MBA program and executive education courses.

One of the top 10 universities in the country, the UAS has a faculty of 600 professors, mostly full-time, and a prestigious Ph.D. program that trains young faculty
members from several universities on the continent in association with an alliance of international universities.

Another important characteristic of UAS is its social commitment. From the very beginning, the university has provided a large number of scholarships for students who cannot afford to pay normal fees. In addition, each school has its own social project: the medical school brings doctors and students to rural areas in which medical attention is scarce; law students and their professors provide legal advice to those unable to pay a lawyer; and similar programs provide services in education, housing, and entrepreneurship.

All of this is possible thanks to years of good relations with national and international agencies, which partially fund those social programs, and with a network of benefactors that support the UAS.

**Christian ethos**

The university began in 1954 as the campus of a Catholic university from a neighboring country. Its first faculty consisted of professors from the mother university and others ‘poached’ from national universities who were attracted to this brand-new university which aimed to provide education of the highest quality: an enticing challenge for young and ambitious academics.

With great vision for the future, the first rector understood that one of his priorities was to form a teaching body that met three conditions: to be young, and flexible enough to acquire a new educational style of their own; to be ‘from the country’, so that they could represent the wide range of ethnicities of the country, and the school would not look like a foreign university; and to pursue excellence in education as the most effective path to social and economic progress.

This plan proved very successful, but a later conflict between the two countries over a border issue made it impossible to continue depending on the mother university. By then, the Universidad América del Sur had grown enough to be able to stand on its own feet. Therefore, ties with headquarters were cut and the UAS became a completely independent institution.

What didn’t change was its Christian identity. The UAS wanted to combine professional excellence with a strong focus on values based on the Gospels. Its dream was to contribute to society with a new generation of engineers, doctors, business managers, lawyers, journalists, etc., who wanted to impregnate their professional careers with integrity, social concern, and compassion.

**Religious context**

At the time of the university’s foundation, this Latin American country – like the rest of the region – was profoundly Catholic. The vast majority of its population baptized their children, got married in church and were buried in a church cemetery. In addition, most attended religious services weekly. Religious festivities were abundant; ceremonies, processions, pilgrimages, and other manifestations of popular devotion
congregated thousands of people even in the smallest towns; and art, culture and gastronomy were full of religious elements.

The voice of the Church’s hierarchy was listened to with veneration, and although not everyone was Catholic, no one dared to disagree in public with Christian dogma and morals.

However, as happened in the rest of the continent, a process of secularization began in the 70s and particularly in the 80s. Official statistics put numbers to those changes: every year figures in respect of canonical marriages, baptisms and first communions decreased systematically.¹

Today, although 75% of the population consider themselves Catholic, it is difficult to say that the prevailing social values are in sync with the teachings of the Church. The number of divorces is accelerating,² births out of wedlock constitute 53% of all births,³ and the rate of abortions – legal and illegal – in the continent is increasing more than in the rest of the world.⁴ Those most distant from Christian values are the youth. Less than 23% of under 25s attend any religious service once a month, the vast majority of university students live with their boyfriends or girlfriends, and polls about their position on abortion, in-vitro fertilization, surrogate maternity, and other issues, show an increasing gap between them and the Church.

The same thing could be said about the legal recognition of same-sex unions (a topic we will explore in depth in the next section), which continues to increase uninterruptedly.⁵

In such circumstances, it comes as no surprise that, for society as a whole, the UAS is considered a good but conservative, old-fashioned institution, and many of its students choose its classrooms because of its high-quality standards rather than for religious reasons. Its Catholic values were a plus in some cases (especially for the parents), but the majority see its Christian identity as a part of the package, something you get with the ‘main thing’ (excellence in professional training), and in a few cases in spite of it. They get along because faculty and staff are friendly and supportive, but from time to time small conflicts arise (for instance, when the university reinforces its dress code, according to which, for instance, shorts and miniskirts are not allowed on campus).

A controversial issue

There are some hot-button issues in which Catholic teaching and public opinion (and sometimes even national laws) spark controversies, such as abortion, death penalty, women in clergy, euthanasia, etc. But not in this country, or at least not yet. The issue in which the traditional Church position is most in conflict with the country’s general population, and in particular with the younger generation, is homosexuality.

It is true that the Church has abandoned some explanations of the past (‘perversion’, ‘abominable sin’, etc.), and the famous ‘whom am I to judge’, said by Pope Francis in his trip to Brazil in 2013, made a huge impact (Ivereigh and Lopez 2015).

Nevertheless, as Pope Francis explained on the same occasion, this matter is defined in the Catechism of the Catholic Church.⁶ In a nutshell, the Catechism considers
homosexuality the ‘relations between men or between women who experience an exclusive or predominant sexual attraction toward persons of the same sex’, and states the following:

- Its psychological genesis remains largely unexplained, and the number of men and women who have deep-seated homosexual tendencies is not negligible.
- Christianity has always considered homosexual acts as intrinsically disordered and contrary to the natural law, and therefore under no circumstances can they be approved.
- This sexual inclination is objectively disordered and constitutes a source of suffering for the majority of persons who feel such inclination. Homosexual persons are called to chastity.
- People with this inclination must be accepted with respect, compassion, and sensitivity. Every sign of unjust discrimination in their regard should be avoided.

Intrinsically connected to this moral judgment is the issue regarding same-sex marriage. For the Church, marriage can only be between a man and a woman, and can never be extended to same-sex couples. In recent times during Pope John Paul II’s papacy, two documents were published, in 1986 and in 2003 (both were signed by Card. Joseph Ratzinger); Pope Benedict repeated the same; as did Pope Francis in ‘Amoris Laetitia’.

A slightly different position regards civil unions, not marriages.

From the communications perspective, it is fascinating – and it deserves a proper study – how these two connected but essentially different elements get mixed up in public perceptions, something that doesn’t happen in other religious-based ethical judgments.

For instance, nobody considers the negative moral consideration regarding alcohol abuse in Christianity, Judaism and Islam as a violation of their rights to drink whatever they fancy. However, when the Catholic Church declares that a homosexual act is a ‘sin’, many people interpret this as a condemnation of the person who has a sexual tendency towards people of the same sex and an aggression to human rights. As some observers have noted, ‘homophobic language applies the term ‘deviated’ to the homosexual person; the Church, on the other hand, talks about acts, not about people.’

It certainly exceeds the objectives of this study to present the scientific debate on the genetic, cultural or behavioral origin of homosexuality. Even a summary of it would be a tremendous task we cannot undertake.

On the other hand, given the communicative approach of this paper, it is important to highlight two elements. First, the surprising contradiction between the efforts from regulators, social watchdogs and media regarding the risks involved in monopolies or in limiting freedom of expression (cf., for instance, some multi-million anti-monopolistic penalties imposed on Microsoft, Google, Facebook, etc.) and the consideration in Western countries that same-sex attraction cannot be morally disputed, and any tentative argument should be judged as hate speech (Ivereigh, de la Cierva, and Valero 2019).
Second, there are notable differences between the most frequent positions in public debate, which often state that they have the science on their part, and what scientific studies actually say. Indeed, the most frequent positions in traditional media and on social media state that in some people homosexuality is genetic, and therefore to prevent or suffocate that tendency would mean to go against nature, and to condemn it morally would be absurd, because it is not a free option; or quite the opposite: that gender is a completely cultural product, the result of family or social pressure and therefore, free sexual self-definition must be encouraged and defended, and it is therefore unethical to force human beings to respect the limits of nature. What is heard less in the public debate are the scientific reasons for one or the other perspective.14

Both approaches have one thing in common: a moral approach to homosexuality is irrational, discriminating and intolerable. This is the view in almost all Western media. Anything a Church representative says on that issue, it makes headlines, even if – technically speaking – there was nothing new on it (which is the essence of ‘news’). This has happened during the pontificate of John Paul II15, that of Benedict XVI16 and now that of Francis.17

As far as the Latin American media are concerned, the Church is seen as particularly guilty of that discrimination because her stand against same-sex marriage has been consistent throughout the continent. Similar opinions are frequently expressed by key opinion makers. The claims of Peruvian Nobel laureate Mario Vargas Llosa, who expressly connected hatred of homosexuals with the Catholic Church, could be taken as representative of the views of the continent’s intellectual elite.18

The above-mentioned confusion between morals and rights affects everybody. It is true that statistics indicate there is a connection between religious beliefs and acceptance of homosexuality. According to a 2019 survey, in some countries, religiously unaffiliated adults were more likely than those who identify with a religion to say homosexuality should be accepted by society.19

Nevertheless, different Pew Research Center surveys conducted in recent years show that most Catholics support legal same-sex marriage, although not in the same proportions. In the United States, about six in ten Catholics (61%) said in a 2019 survey that they favor allowing gays and lesbians to marry. In Western Europe, large majorities of Catholics said in 2017 that they support legal same-sex marriage. That was the case in the Netherlands (92%), Spain (91%), the United Kingdom (78%), France (74%) and Germany (70%). On the other hand, in almost all of the Central and Eastern European countries surveyed by the Center in 2015 and 2016, most Catholics oppose same-sex marriage. Nine in ten Catholics in Ukraine said same-sex marriage should be illegal, as did 66% of Catholics in Hungary and 62% of Catholics in Poland. Other countries around the world where most Catholics said society should be accepting of homosexuality included Australia (81%), the Philippines (80%) and South Africa (62%).

Data from several Latin America countries are not available. According to a survey conducted by the Vanderbilt University, more than 62% of the population of Latin America and the Caribbean ‘strongly disapproves’ of same-sex marriage, but in five countries those in favor of this right constitute the majority: Mexico, Chile, Argentina, Uruguay and Brazil.20
Approval of same-sex marriage is higher amid the younger generation, and differences between Catholic and non-Catholic youth are almost nil. In the Universidad de América del Sur’s own country, surveys conducted last year among people under 30 showed that more than 78% of that segment is in favor of full recognition of all aspects of same sex unions of marriage: leave of absence, permits, bonus, pensions, etc.

For university students, recognition of gay rights is considered a human rights issue, just as, for instance, women’s right to vote was discussed a century ago; and any distinction based on sexual orientation is plainly an intolerable discrimination.

As a further manifestation of this confusion (or maybe its cause), the two cardinals in the country defend opposite views. The older cardinal, archbishop of the nation’s capital (and soon to become emeritus), underlines the importance of welcoming people who identify themselves as homosexuals. On several occasions, he has told his priests to ensure that ‘those brothers and sisters feel well treated and not judged whenever they come to church’. He has even proposed introducing the rite of blessing homosexual couples that is used in various European countries.21

On the contrary, the younger cardinal, archbishop of the second city, stressed in a recent media interview that, ‘welcoming is not blessing’, and that he cannot forgo teaching what the Catechism of the Catholic Church says in this regard, which is that homosexuality is a disorderly tendency, and that any homosexual act is sinful.

The differences between them are so great and notorious that, for 3 years, the episcopal conference has decided not to make any public statement on the matter, because it could not reach an agreed consensus (and because, in the opinion of some prelates, it is not certain whether the formulation of the Catholic doctrine on this issue is permanent or may change in the near future).

For the UAS’ executive committee, there is no doubt what Catholic teaching on this subject really is, and what it is their mission.22 They stand with the Pope, at whatever cost.23

In addition, the issue has other ramifications in campus life beyond teaching: whether or not to authorize LGBTQ clubs for students, open non-academic activities to same-sex partners, offer specific religious ministries and pastoral programs, etc.24 In all those circumstances, there could be a contrast between individual rights and the protection of institutional values and principles, and many options are available, but the roots are the same.

Despite that firm resolution, the consequences of a certain uncertainty in the Catholic milieu are indisputable. Faced with a broader controversy, it is not clear that the local bishops or other Catholic universities will support the UAS or whether, on the contrary, the university will be seen as defending a traditionalist view, not shared by of the majority of brothers and sisters in the faith.25

Part II: a crisis unfolds

A class that went wrong

That Friday, second year students at the medical school started their classes on bioethics, which were entrusted to the vice dean, Dr. Filomeno (not his real name).
Dr. Filomeno is a prestigious professional, highly respected among his colleagues and appreciated by his students. He has more than 40 years of experience as a pediatrician, 30 as a professor, and is the director of one of the most important clinics in the country. In addition, 20 years ago he specialized in bioethics, and he is a member of various bioethics associations.

Dr. Filomeno was instrumental in the creation of the medical school. He was the first dean, and his reputation and connections were vital to get the final approval from the national ministry of health. Because of his age, 2 years ago he passed the baton to a younger professor, but he remained on the committee to help the new generation. In fact, it was Dr. Filomeno who suggested the Rector appoint Dr. Irina as the new dean, since he was her Ph.D. director and knew her potential.

Today’s topic, addressed in online format due to the pandemic, was homosexuality. He explained some of its causes, mentioning among them, maternal overprotection, absent parental image, rapes and groping during the school age years, among others.

As usual, Dr. Filomeno accompanied his words with slides in which he summarized his explanations:

Homosexuality: causes - Non hormonal, non-genetic - Predisposing causes: maternal overprotection in many cases - Conditioning factors: faulty or absent paternal image - Triggers: social environment, negative friendships, media, entertainment, drugs.

Some sexuality disorders - Artificial bisexuality: opposite sex clothes, surgery, hormone treatment, cosmetic hype, mannerism - Transvestites, drag queens, artistic attitude - Sexual dysphoria: tendency to identify with the opposite sex - Sexual aberrations: sadomasochism, fetishism and others. - Gender ideology.

Public manifestations of human sexuality - “Funny” television shows
- “Important” people and sexualist propaganda - Gay nightclubs
- Movies and soap operas - “Gender equality” campaigns - Sexualist celebrations: rallies, protests, etc. - “Gay pride” day - Same sex adoption

(Information presented in class)

It was the first class on Friday morning, at 8:30. A few minutes after the class ended, around 9:38, someone posted on Twitter the following comment:

#HomophobiaAlert #Transphobia At Universidad América del Sur, Dr. Filomeno dedicates a class to lies about sexuality. “Homosexuality is detonated by rape or groping”. What kind of doctors are they training?!

To give it more traction, the tweet tagged the accounts of the head of the Higher Education Authority, the Ministry of Education, and the Ministry of Women, as well as other accounts that promote respect for sexual diversity.

Soon, the distribution of the post grew steadily, as it was also accompanied by homophobia-related hashtags. The user who posted the tweet had no more than 300 followers and, – as Fabiola later found out – was not a student at the university but the sister of a student.

Due to the controversial nature of the topic, the mentions, and the tags, dissemination grew rapidly. Obviously, the first circle in which the post was shared was among the students at the medical school. They used not only the original platform but also a screenshot on WhatsApp.
The academic authorities of the medical school were among those who received the screenshot on WhatsApp, not just once but a number of times, since some of the students were worried about the impact it might have on them, the school, and their professors. Those professors were also teaching their own courses, so they were not able to read the messages immediately.

Due to budget restrictions, the UAS communications team couldn’t afford to use a digital monitoring tool, as this alone would have accounted for more than 10% of their adjusted budget, and other priorities had been defined: promoting the participation of experts in traditional media, media training for professors, staff growth, etc.

For that reason, Fabiola found out what was happening on the social networks only at 13:00, 3 h after the initial post. It was then that the Dean of the school had just seen the post (she got it almost immediately from more than one student, but she was busy and didn’t check her cellphone); she immediately forwarded Fabiola the screenshot of the tweet through WhatsApp.

As soon as Fabiola got the screenshot of the original tweet, her first reaction was to verify the truthfulness of its content: that what the post said actually did happen in class. And it did.

In the meantime, other people were pouring more fuel on the fire. For instance, another student posted:

This professor is clearly manipulating the class. Homosexuality has been declassified as a pathology, and in no way is it right to speak about it as a sickness with causes and consequences. Training has to be respectful of personal identities.

But… it comes from Universidad América del Sur. What else could you expect from a Catholic University?

Gender ideology, a pathological sexuality? Where does this guy come from?

I am not surprised. When I was a student there, they organized a course on work at home only for women.

At that time, the post had been shared only 70 times, yet Fabiola was quite aware of the potentially dangerous implications for the university if it were not handled properly. So, although the university didn’t have a crisis plan, she decided to act.

Her first decision was to call Eva, an external communications consultant with whom she had worked a few years earlier. After listening to Fabiola’ concerns, Eva suggested activating a Crisis Management Team. But… no such thing existed at UAS!

Both Fabiola and Eva agreed that, being a complex and risky topic, an expert from the medical school should be involved. In addition, due to the fact that Dr. Filomeno was one of the academic authorities, the university’s President should be involved too. It was not clear that the communications department alone would have the authority to convince the school to do what – in their opinion – had to be done.

Fabiola called the President immediately. He rapidly agreed to a meeting with some members of the executive committee, but it would have to wait an hour and a half. It was lunch time and committee members were not available.
The crisis management team meets

At 15:15, Fabiola opened the first Zoom meeting. Present at the meeting were the President, the Vice-president of the campus where Dr. Filomeno was affiliated, the Dean of the medical school, the Dean of the communications school (an expert on media and public discourse) and Eva. The criterion in selecting these individuals in particular was that they constituted the university’s ‘dominant coalition’: they had the authority to decide and act.

The meeting started with an evaluation on the relevance of the facts. Because of the nature of the topic, it was like a gas leak in the kitchen: any spark could make the whole house explode. If not corrected, Eva said, the post would escalate and become a serious problem.

Once the seriousness of the situation was established, it was time to define the problem the university was facing. As a mere introduction, Eva offered the following options:

a. Dr. Filomeno has made no mistake: it was his duty to talk about homosexuality in the course of Bioethics. Moreover, it was also reasonable for him to express his moral and personal point of view because that is what is expected of a professor, even more so in a subject such as bioethics. Nobody could be surprised if the UAS presents the Catholic point of view on this matter: it’s what we are. If someone has been offended, that feeling has no objective basis.

b. Dr. Filomeno did well to deal with this issue in class, but there were two aspects that could be improved: on the one hand, his explanation does not correspond fully to what medicine says today, nor did he provide scientific evidence to support his words; on the other hand, the mixture of scientific content and moral content may have created confusion among students, with respect to an issue about which emotions are particularly sensitive.

c. The situation had arisen from the mixture of two elements: a poor explanation plus a misinterpretation of his words. Together they resulted in public outrage. No matter whether it is justified or completely baseless, we have to reject the professor’s words. It is impossible to win that battle.

d. Given that issues regarding homosexuality are explosive, it may be better for professors to limit themselves to giving an ‘unbiased’ view, with scientific arguments for and against, without taking a position on the issue (or by referring its moral aspects to core curriculum classes on anthropology), and certainly only in conventional, not online classes. Online classes are too risky for such a topic.

At this point, there were two main opinions on the CMT. Some of its members agreed with option a). Accordingly, they interpreted the post as another attack on the university for its Christian values. Maybe the content of Dr. Filomeno’s class was not 100% correct, but the reaction was completely disproportionate. In that case, the natural conclusion was to consider the incident unworthy of a response. We should stand by our principles, and the storm will blow over.

The other opinion focused on the accuracy of Dr. Filomeno’s description of causes, symptoms, and prevention measures concerning homosexuality. Because, if the
explanation were not correct and didn’t represent a true Catholic vision on gender dysphoria, the university’s Christian identity would demand that it correct that information and apologize for any offense caused.

The other two options were considered not relevant: option c) would mean sacrificing our identity to save face: a sort of betrayal of the UAS’ Christian values. Option d) was a distraction concerned with the future: what mattered there and then was what to do. There’ll be time to study what to do in future Bioethics classes, but not now.

At this point, the Dean of the medical school clarified that Dr. Filomeno’s explanation was not based on science. Dr. Irina commented:

What Dr. Filomeno has included in his class is what was thought and taught years ago. The American Psychiatric Association has not included homosexuality as a disease for years and we, as a medical school, must teach what the scientific community has studied. Dr. Filomeno has included in his explanation his personal and moral judgment, reinforced by what he studied decades ago. We can describe it as an “obsolete explanation”, which is an error that must be corrected.

This assessment, conducted by the only expert in the room, was considered satisfactory by all. Accordingly, it was clear that a mistake had been made, and that the university should correct it and reach all those who had been affected. In actual fact, the need to correct a mistake, which might spread further confusion, was demanded precisely by the UAS’ Christian values. It was the truth.

In a normal situation, an error in class would be corrected in the next class. But since this particular error was distributed online, the university’s rectification and apology should reach the same people who learned about it. The use of social media was indispensable.

The next topic to discuss was who should apologize? There was consensus that the nature of the error recommended that the person who made the mistake should be the one to apologize. First, it was his obligation to his students, who deserved not just an apology but also a more scientific explanation on the topic; second, a fast, humble, and sincere apology would be better accepted by his students (who considered him a great professor) and reduce the level of hostility among the general public; third, a personal mistake would have less impact than a corporate one.

The difficulty here would be personal: Dr. Filomeno felt hurt and humiliated by what was happening on the social media. It was a serious setback for a prestigious figure in the country. Besides, it was not completely clear that he was fully aware of the seriousness of the issue. He seemed to think that he had been imprudent but not mistaken ...

In order to treat him as he deserved, the CMT asked the Dean to talk to him in person and explain to him what was at stake. Thanks to her persuasive skills but, most of all, because of Dr. Filomeno’s strong bond with the University, he agreed to sign an apology.

As far as the communications department was concerned, a written apology was not the ideal tool. Empathy and emotional connection can be expressed better on video. But a text was the second-best option, so Fabiola accepted the counter proposal.

The following step was to decide the right course of action. Three possible scenarios were evaluated: taking the initiative and apologizing as soon as possible; making
preparations but waiting to see how the controversy evolved on social networks and apologizing only if it became a major issue; and finally, doing nothing and hoping that sooner or later, the issue would disappear on its own.

Each option had advantages and disadvantages, and the decision was not easy because of the uncertainty of the situation. If they apologized and it turned out that the post was not that popular, the apology would have promoted the mistake, and they would have shown weakness. But if they waited to see, they might arrive too late… Even the option of doing nothing had traction: it was the usual way of reacting when the university was accused of being ‘too Catholic and old-fashioned’.

The CMT couldn’t reach an agreement that was shared by everybody. At this point, the President took the leadership and decided:

We have to act, and we have to act soon. We, as a university, have made a mistake and we must correct it, with the students and with society. We will admit it and give our truest apologies.

Accordingly, he asked the communications department to prepare a text to be offered to Dr. Filomeno as a draft, to have it signed within 2 h, and to distribute it through the university’s channels on the social media.

It was also agreed that, since the conversation had started on Twitter and had not ‘jumped’ massively to other social networks, the apology would be posted there. Monitoring social and other media would be critical in the upcoming hours, as other actions would have to be evaluated if the incident were published in a traditional medium.

In addition, Fabiola and her team prepared a press release to have it ready in case the media showed interest in the story. The press release could also be published on the university’s official website.

At that time, a number of journalists were already aware of what was going on and had called Fabiola. She didn’t take the calls but instructed one of her team members to redirect any media enquiry to the university’s PR agency. The agency’s mediation was very useful: it received more information regarding what reporters wanted to know and treated journalists with professionalism while everybody in Fabiola’ team was working at full speed under pressure.

The communications department was in charge of dealing with traditional media and social media. Other stakeholders were not its direct responsibility. Nevertheless, Fabiola recalled the importance of informing not only the university’s Executive Committee but also the rest of stakeholders: the faculty (and, in particular, the professors at the medical school), students at the other schools, benefactors, and even the Church authorities.

Finally, the CMT agreed that Medical students should be told. The Dean suggested taking advantage of an online meeting to be held that same evening, on the occasion of the Medical School Week, which many students, together with benefactors and other friends, would be attending. Everybody agreed on the plan.

Since the tasks were clear, the meeting dissolved.

At this time (about 5:00 p.m.), the original post had been retweeted approximately 170 times.
Implementation of the strategy

Immediately afterwards, the communications team prepared the proposal for a press release that, as agreed, would be posted on Twitter.

The department had to immediately create a new twitter account for the medical school, the only school without one.

The purpose of this move was to make sure the issue remained at the level of the medical school, and was not seen as a mistake made by the entire institution. Then, of course, the rest of the official accounts would retweet it.

From the academic point of view, it was important not to spread the mistake any further. The medical school therefore decided not to upload that specific session to the virtual campus, but to prepare a new session with the correct content, and then upload it. Nevertheless, this was not urgent: it could wait until after the weekend.

Fabiola and her team prepared a text and, after it had been validated by Eva, delivered it to the Dean of the medical school, in order to confirm Dr. Filomeno’s proposed apology and to receive her comments.

Minutes later, while the draft of the press release was still under review, a user with more than 12,000 followers retweeted the original post. Forty minutes later, a national celebrity, with 380,000 followers, also shared the post.

One hour later, the email exchanges between the academic authorities at the medical school and the Communications team were still continuing. The proposals of the Communications team were not completely accepted by the school and it eliminated elements which, according to Fabiola and her team, were completely indispensable.

Meanwhile, the controversy became a trending topic, the sixth most popular in the whole country.

What worried the medical school was how the whole story was going to affect Dr. Filomeno and, accordingly, how the faculty – his colleagues, most of them hired and trained by him – and the whole medical profession would react.

However, the UAS Vice-president still thought that the apology should only reach those who were actually present in class and might be mistaken, disappointed, or even offended. In his view, there was no need to apologize to other faculty members or to students from other schools.

For the communications team, that had already been discussed and clarified, but either it was not fully accepted, or those who were now rejecting the decision were not present at the initial CMT meeting.

Fabiola and her team insisted: without a proper apology, not only would more radical action be required afterwards, which could affect the Vice-dean more seriously, but it might mean that the school’s training could be accused of being obsolete. Finally, by 19:30 the Dean of the medical school accepted the text and Fabiola sent it to the President and the Vice-president for their approval.

In the meanwhile, the original post continued to spread on Twitter, with more than 200 new retweets in 3 h.

Finally, by 20:30, the message was approved by the Rector. Minutes earlier, the institution’s name had dropped off the list of trending topics.
Half an hour later, the statement was published on the medical school’s account, created for this purpose, and was signed by the Dean. Minutes later, the university’s account retweeted it, with the introduction:

We share a message from the medical school. As Universidad América del Sur, we extend our apologies for those who felt offended and we reject any kind of discrimination, either for sexual orientation or of any other nature. Our classrooms have been and will always be a space for diverse and academic dialogue.

Message to the community of the Medical School

Dear community of the School of Medicine and in general:

Today, one of our bioethics classes dealt with the issue of sexuality from an outdated perspective that is not in tune with current scientific and social positioning in this regard, a situation that we deeply regret.

Dr. Filomeno, the professor who gave the class, asks us to convey to you the following message: “I address myself first of all to my young students, to my fellow faculty members and to the community in general, to express my sincere apologies for the way I taught the class on bioethics of sexuality today. My colleagues have called to my attention the need to analyze and reformulate my approach to these issues, with a new vision, aligned with the current scientific approach. They have my total commitment to do so, as I have acted in my more than 50 years as a doctor in the service of people’s health.”

We believe that every professional, as well as every serious institution, must accept their mistakes. We thank Dr. Filomeno for his professionalism in acknowledging his mistake and our university community for their openness and understanding; We invite you to maintain and promote academic dialogue that seeks to understand the point of view of others to advance in the search for truth.

Cordially,

Council of the Medical School

Almost 12 h had passed since the original tweet reporting toxic teaching in class was posted at 9:38.

Stakeholders’ reactions

The reception of the statement was 70% positive. Many Twitter users acknowledged and were even favorably surprised by the fact that the institution had spoken out and had taken note of its mistake.

It’s good that they recognize the tremendous performance of one of their professors, responsible for the training of future leaders in our country. Let’s change that Jurassic mentality people!

People have the right to fail, learn, and be better. Good statement from my beloved university.

Other voices asked for an exemplary punishment for the professor involved:

Get rid of him! Apologies are not enough.

That was not a mistake! Only a naïve person can believe that. It defines the wrong posture of a dinosaur anchored in the Middle Ages. The university should have better professors.
Also, a few people demanded to know how specifically the university was going to make amends for the error:

It’s noble to admit the error, but this should not end here. And not because Dr. Filomeno’s head should roll, but because the university must show that it will update its approach (having recognized it as outdated) and that this statement was not just a way of getting round the issue.

This statement makes it worse. The university has identified the problem and it hasn’t corrected it.

It’s worth noting that, although most of students active on social media welcomed the university’s response, there was a group of students who were disconcerted and annoyed about the UAS’ apology: when they learnt the original post, they decided to actively defend their university on Twitter. Some of them were active users, but several weren’t and created new profiles to be able to support Dr. Filomeno, the Medical School and the UAS from ‘completely unjust attacks’. The fact that Dr. Filomeno and the university as a whole had recognized some wrongdoing and apologized left them somewhat confused.

The next day, Saturday, the environment on social media was still turbulent. Some people repeated points of view already published the previous day, but a new group appeared, stating that the apology was disproportionate. According to them, the university had ‘fallen into the gay lobby trap’:

The homosexual dictatorship scores a goal and sets a precedent at the Universidad América del Sur.

Known for its academic quality and for being run by conservative Catholics, it is not surprising that a professor of medicine has taught a class on homosexuality indicating that it is not genetic and what its possible psychological and social causes are.

This sparked pro-LGBT fury, prompting the medical school to publicly apologize for the “outdated” message and causing the teacher to admit an error and to make it clear that such teachings will never be taught again.

Thus, the drive against nature has the privilege of being untouchable and uncritical in a university considered to be Catholic.

Also, some people commented that the university should never have treated the professor in this way:

Clearly those are not his words. He was forced to “declare” this.

During the weekend, Fabiola and her team continued to monitor the social media and to keep the President, his executive committee, and other key university leaders informed. Among those that had to be kept in the loop was the relatively new department of compliance. Its responsibilities include making sure there is no place for sexual harassment or any kind of discrimination in the university.

The medical school meanwhile filmed another class by the same professor on the same topic, to be made available on the university’s virtual campus. After careful examination, the school decided it was not clear enough, and discarded the project.
Fortunately for the university, on Sunday the national media put the spotlight on a new and sensationalistic political issue, and reporters’ attention was diverted from the controversy.

**The following week**

On Monday morning, the author of the original tweet (which, by this time, had been retweeted a thousand times), a young medical student at another university whose sister was in Dr. Filomeno’s class, made a new post:

I published this thinking that most people clearly know that being LGBTQ+ is not a disease, but there are even medical students that think that what Dr. Filomeno said is true just because he said it. This just shows how dangerous it is to give space and power to ignorant people.

The number of interactions ceased to increase the following Tuesday, four days after the class and the publishing of the post.

**Lessons learned**

Six weeks later, the President and his executive committee met again to review what had happened. Some professors with leading positions at the University were also invited, as well as Fabiola.

Ahead of this meeting, the communications department had prepared a debriefing, which considered the context of the event, the chronological development of the situation, an explanation of the development of the meetings, the internal coordination, and the perception of the statements, comments, and lessons.

The goal of the meeting was threefold. First, revising the facts in chronological order was an opportunity for everybody to get the full picture: not all attendees were present at all meetings nor were they kept informed.

For instance, most of the participants learned that the medical school didn’t take the opportunity to talk to its students about this episode. It was one of the tasks delegated to the school but, for different reasons, it was not implemented.

Second, it was a helpful occasion to clarify some details regarding decisions with which some people didn’t fully agree, or to go deeper into how different actions were implemented. Also, it was good occasion to discuss the consequences of the university’s Christian ethos, which are considered ‘well known’ and so rarely studied directly.

Third, the meeting was also intended to spell out the takeaways of the crisis. To ensure this, a crisis management consultant was invited to list the main lessons. He stressed the following points:

- Importance of a fast response. Specific methods to make it possible.
- Teaching faculty as the right channel with many students.
- Students as a key stakeholder group. They shouldn’t learn about anything happening inside the university through external sources. Need of internal channels, properly segmented.
On social media, it is crucial to participate in the conversation. In a crisis, manpower has to be reinforced.

The session was highly valued by the participants. Some mentioned that they had considered the press release issued by the institution too severe, but with more information, they now understood the tone and its content.

As a consequence of this crisis, the university took the following decisions:

- To hire a PR firm to create a crisis plan for the university, specifying the composition of a crisis team and establishing its protocols, a risk analysis, and some scenarios for the most frequent types of crises affecting universities.
- The medical school should hire an expert to train its professors to teach controversial topics in the classroom.
- A training program for all faculty members on ten sensitive topics, with three components: a scientific approach, a communications approach, and some practical time for exercises.

### Part III: takeaways

**Universities need to be prepared for a crisis**

All institutions, even those which are well-managed, more powerful, and considered as having a solid reputation, can suffer crises. No one is protected. If we look at the different lists of the top crisis of the year that some media report when we get close to December 31 (Fortune, Forbes, Financial Times, etc.), we find big companies like Apple, Bayer, BBVA, Boeing, Facebook, McDonald’s, McKinsey, Rio Tinto, Tesla, Volkswagen, or Wells Fargo: not small HSBC, but gigantic corporations.

Universities are not the exception: in recent years, old and new universities have been hit by different types of crises: accidents with victims (Riocuarto, Argentina and Strathmore, Kenya); natural catastrophes like a flood (La Sabana, Colombia); food poisoning (ICESI, Venezuela); accusations of unfair decisions regarding scholarships (Oxford, UK); gender ideology (Toronto, Canada); freedom of speech (Marquette, USA); a condemnatory court sentence (Barcelona, Spain); fight between the executive committee and the owners (PUCP, Peru); suicidal student (Aberdeen, UK); rapes on campus (Stanford and Yale, USA); sexual harassment (Naples, Italy); racism (SUNY, USA); plagiarism (UP, Mexico); hackers (IESE, Spain); questionable investments in tax-havens (Cambridge, UK); unethical donors (MIT, USA), etc.

In most of those cases, damages amounted to millions of dollars and recovery took not months but years. Prevention and crisis preparedness are also effective tools to save money.

There are many ways to describe the essence of an institutional crisis. Although some people may consider ‘crisis’ only when the worst happens (or, in a reputational crisis, when stakeholders’ reactions cause a tangible disruption to the organization to the point of challenging its license to operate), we prefer the approach in which a crisis may be defined by the attributes of a threat to central organizational goals, short decision-making time, and surprise (Hermann 1972). The key element is uncertainty: an
organizational crisis as ‘an unstable time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending’ (Fink 1986). A complementary view is offered by a sociologist like Elizalde, who defines crisis from a subjective perspective: a situation, in which a person or an institution is immersed, consisting of four basic elements: a major threat to its scope of power and autonomy; a lack of sufficient time to resolve the problem by applying normal procedures; intense emotions; behaviors that are out of control, both within and beyond the walls of the institution (Elizalde 2018).

Summing up, we could say that the episode described in this case study is a real crisis, even if – because of the quick and adequate response, or because of the strong relations between the UAS and its stakeholders, or simply out of good luck – the worst was avoided.

**Best practices**

Five elements are outstanding in the way the UAS handled this online crisis:

1. Professionalism and gut feelings on the part of the communication department. It’s remarkable that after seeing the first tweet the communications director was quick enough to realize the magnitude of the problem and to immediately put a crisis response into motion.

2. Escalating the problem to the President also deserves praise. Sometimes communications departments think they can handle a crisis because they are in charge of the channels (website, social media profiles, media office), thinking that a crisis is a communications problem to be managed by technicians. On the contrary, most crises are managerial problems, and involving the top management is the best path to give a consistent response.

3. The UAS executive committee decided its positioning in this controversy by looking at their identity for inspiration. They asked themselves what kind of University they were, and took decisions based on their Christian ethos. In fact, the CMT should always remind themselves about the company’s purpose, and include their moral standpoint as a relevant part of their communication.

4. In our view, it was also a wise decision to keep the conversation inside the platform where it started, without contaminating other people who were not affected by it. It was good to wait and see whether the controversy on Twitter reached the media before answering requests from reporters. One of crisis management’s best practices consists of containing the extent of the crisis as far as possible.

5. Finally, the UAS did a superb job regarding post-crisis evaluation. Writing a forensic report, organizing a meeting to analyze pros and cons of the institutional response, and then deciding on an ambitious plan to make another crisis unlikely, are also best practices.

**Recommendations**

In addition, here are five recommendations for the UAS and for any other university that finds itself in a similar situation.
1. The Crisis Plan

The best way to be prepared is to carry out the process of drafting a crisis plan. We stress the word process because what is vital is the preparation achieved in working out the plan, more than the final document.

Crisis preparedness helps organizations to react fast and in an appropriate way. This is particularly important for university institutions, which have rather complex structures and bureaucratic management. Having had crisis protocols in place would have helped the UAS in three ways:

a. To have come up with an approved text in not more than 2 h, instead of the 12 h it took, thanks to having specimen drafts ready and clear guidelines on how to take decisions regarding the various networks.

b. To have made a better composition of its crisis management team. Two other people would have contributed effectively to the discussions: the executive committee member in charge of faculty, and the member in charge of the student body. In addition, a lawyer should always be part of the CMT.

c. To understand that in a CMT it is crucial to be able to delegate. The Dean of the Medical School took too many tasks on herself: dealing with Dr. Filomeno face to face, and convincing him to apologize; dealing with the school’s faculty and students; preparing a new class to be filmed and uploaded to the university’s virtual campus; etc. Because of such a loaded schedule, she was unable to do everything, or even to inform the rest of the CMT about her actions.

2. Stakeholder management

A crisis is a form of universal dissent: the institution is in the spotlight and under pressure. Employees, shareholders, clients, public authorities, neighbors, partners, financial analysts and investors, the media and society as a whole expect and demand information.

One of the first tasks of a CMT is to draw up a map of the institution’s stakeholders. This tool helps the organization to not omit any of its stakeholders, and to understand better what is at stake for each one of them. Crisis management is about managing perceptions and answering explicit and implicit enquiries from everybody affected.

Identifying stakeholders is followed by the appointment of spokespeople for each group: someone who takes care of each particular stakeholder and whose responsibility is to reinforce relationships.

In this particular case, the Universidad América del Sur could have managed stakeholders more systematically, by entrusting a spokesperson to deal with two groups that were neglected: professors and students.

3. Internal stakeholders first

Except when there are victims, internal stakeholders are always the first priority in a crisis. Organizations should put them first, not only because they are impacted by the
event and its consequences, but also because top management need their collaboration both in managing the problem and in reaching other stakeholders. Relationships are bonds between people, and stakeholders normally relate to specific people more than to the institution itself. People prefer to be informed by individuals whom they know and trust.

In a university, trusted relationships are established between students and professors. Therefore, faculty performs a vital role in a crisis. In addition, professors cannot be seen in the way that ‘middle management’ is seen in a large company. Both their role and responsibilities, and their unique relationship with the university (properly speaking, ‘they are’ the university) means that they must be placed at the core of any crisis response.

In this particular case, the UAS could have benefited from the faculty’s intensive collaboration, in three specific ways:

a. Someone on the CMT should have taken the responsibility of keeping them informed, and even listening to them before decisions were taken (a focus group, for instance); the UAS should have paid special attention to the students at the Medical School who attended the bioethics course and should have treated them on a personal basis.

b. Faculty could have played an important role in keeping students informed and in participating in their online conversations. The fact that medical students decided to defend their school on their own initiative shows their appreciation for the university but a lack of orientation. Their disappointment, when the university published an apology, could have been avoided.

c. A key element for faculty would have been on-going support of Dr. Filomeno, in public and in private. And to do this, it is indispensable to have sufficient manpower and not to treat this as just one of many other urgent things to do.

4. Social media

Social networks represent a turbulent environment for all kinds of institutions, and in particular for those whose main stakeholders belong to the younger generations. They are not only channels of information but fast and effective channels of social mobilization regarding (or even against) organizations.

Although the UAS knew how to manage a digital crisis, here are three ways in which it could have done better:

a. Monitoring social media is a must, so that any problem can be dealt with when it is still small and easily fixed. From that point of view, hiring a monitoring service is a good investment.

b. Segmentation is crucial to reach specific targets: for instance, a different communication should be sent to the Medical School faculty and to the other schools (not different in content but definitely in details and in frequency).

c. An institution’s main role on social media during a crisis is to participate in the conversation and to provide answers which are as personal as possible. To do
that in a crisis, when the volume of posts is so high, means that communication teams must be reinforced. This has to be planned in advance because during a crisis time is so scarce that you can’t stop to ask for help.

5. The crisis is solved, the issue is not

At the heart of this crisis, there is a conflict between the University’s values and principles – its identity – and those of its social context. If the conflict remains, any spark could initiate another crisis, and even a worse one, since second crises usually have deeper and longer impact.

So, in addition to all those decisions regarding crisis planning, etc., the UAS should consider other actions:

a. Better training for faculty and staff regarding sexual orientation, gender ideology and other sensitive topics, in order to be able to explain Christian anthropology with arguments and empathy, lighting up minds not fires.

b. Initiatives aimed at UAS students, so that they better understand UAS’s Christian ethos as the root of everything positive at the university and not as limitations. If only a minority of UAS students shares its Christian ethos, or even understands it, the university is open to crisis.

c. A proactive attitude in fighting any kind of discrimination, together with other institutions, and developing programs to train students to become elements of social integration. Actions speak louder than words.

Practical communication guidelines in speaking about homosexuality

As a tentative work-in-progress document, open to further discussions, we gather here some provisional communication guidelines for whoever has to speak about homosexuality on behalf of a Catholic university like UAS (and in doing that, wishes to express the Catholic position):

1. Be aware that you are entering a minefield. Your point of view frontally contradicts the dominant culture in most of the western world. It is possible that you become the target not only for some disgruntled students and/or professors, but also for people you don’t even know and never would have thought were also stakeholders: activist groups, social watchdogs and self-appointed defenders of the public interest (Elizalde 2018). There is a high possibility that they not only attack you but try to turn your stakeholders (students, families, sponsors, partnered companies, etc.) against you. They might use the case as an attempt to turn it into a lesson for everyone else. You’ll be inside a story much bigger than you. So if you do it, it must be because you want to, never inadvertently.

2. Do not forget a fundamental point: it is you who decides what to say, how to say it and when to say it. There is no moral obligation to stand up and declare your position in front of someone who has no authority to demand that from you, and when you know they will twist your words. You decide the context of
your interventions (Elizalde 2009). Reporters, social activists or politicians are not courts of law! Accordingly, speak up only if the context allows the speaker to deal with this topic with care: the speaker should be an expert and speak in scientific, not ideological terms, to an audience which is interested in learning, not fighting, and should have enough time for such a complex argument. Otherwise, it’s better to decline the offer; it’s simply not worth it.

3. Don’t speak defensively but in positive terms. A university with a Christian ethos is by definition a place where different ideas can be debated in constructive ways; such an institution is a promoter of social integration that embraces diversity and inclusion in all their forms (and not just from the sexual point of view). Your starting point is your moral stand: express it, and then illustrate it with stories. Speaking in positive terms also means contextualizing Christian doctrine on sexuality among other, equally important parts of the Gospel: social justice, defense of the vulnerable, etc. (Cannata 2014). Don’t make people associate Christian morals with political conservatism!

4. Show a high dose of respect and empathy. Christians shouldn’t speak about categories but about people, each of whom has their history, their wounds, their illusions, their families, their work, their projects. The dignity of the person transcends his sexual orientation. Actually, don’t move forward till your audience understood the first Christian principle: the unconditional acceptance of the person (Ivereigh, de la Cierva, and Valero 2019). Therefore, try to understand the other’s wounds, accept that he or she probably acts with good intentions, and promote the culture of encounter. We must never lose sight of the fact that people deserve not only respect, but also love and a message of hope.

5. Respect is also manifested in an appropriate tone. Paternalistic expressions such as ‘you have to help gays’, ‘you have to accompany them in their difficult condition’, etc., will provoke instinctive reactions of rejection. It’s neither a competition between different ethical standards nor which one bears more fruit: let people draw their own conclusions. As the Italian journalist Bruno Mastroianni says, ‘the secret is to propose one’s vision of the family without having to compare it with other forms of love. A Christian has every right in democracy to propose what he considers best for society’ (Mastroianni 2017).

6. Distinguish between rights, science and morals. As the institutional representative of a university (a center for education, research and training), focus on the first, and start by making an unequivocal defense of the dignity and rights of all human beings, and the rejection of any form of discrimination. Then, continue by demanding openness to scientific research, freedom from ideological impositions and intellectual honesty about finding scientific truth.

7. If you are a scientist (a medical doctor, a psychologist, etc.), let the data speak for you. In class, talk should be on science. And there is a lot of scientific research about the origin, effects, etc., of homosexuality. Any lesson on this subject must focus on the numerous investigations carried out by renowned professionals and published in serious journals, which at the moment provide a lot of information, although there is still a long way to go (Ganna et al. 2019; Alvarez et al. 2019; Oliva et al. 2020; NICE 2021). Be aware that such research does not
contradict Christian moral assessment of homosexuality (and neither those of other religions and cultures) because they move on different levels, just as an ethical consideration of polygamy does not depend on whether such practice is good or bad for health, for the economy or for political life.

8. It is also science to explain how a doctor approaches these issues. ‘When someone asks for help in resolving something that causes suffering or subjective discomfort, the doctor who wants to do good medical, psychological or psychotherapeutic practice first tries to accept and listen to that person without judgment, then will seek to delve into the origin and causes of what causes the discomfort and, in agreement and collaboration with those who ask for help, draw up a plan to seek a solution or mitigation to their suffering. The professional will actively avoid manipulating or forcing patients to direct their lives towards a pre-decided goal. This does not mean inactivity or passivity on the part of the professional, but precisely an active acceptance of the freedom, in all its meaning, of the person with whom the doctor is working in consent and collaboration’ (Chiclana 2017).

9. In addition, clinical practice shows here the same as in other fields of medicine: that each person must be cared for in their uniqueness, without generalizing. Medicine, psychology or sexology explain a few things, but each person is a mystery, and his or her dignity demands extreme delicacy. It is also a scientific request, what doctors and researchers ask for: protection from ideologies, media or social pressures, religions or economic interests (Howard et al. 2017).

10. Regarding morals, if you think it will help your case, first establish the anthropological context. If you are a chaplain or a Church representative and you have to make a religious statement, start by stating that the Church promotes the understanding, respect and defense of the freedom of people with same-sex attraction to act as they see fit. For you it might be something unnecessary and obvious: for those who are listening to you, it might have been lost in translation. Recent statements, letters and gestures from Pope Francis are eloquent signs of a strong effort to combine a positive approach to these issues while not negotiating about Catholic doctrine. Do the same.

11. Also, underline the bond with what the Pope, the national bishops conference and the local bishop say. Don’t be isolated but reinforce the element of union with many other people. And remember that the Church is not positioned in the open debate about the natural or cultural origin of homosexuality, or the causes for which some are attracted to people of the same sex. The Catechism simply points out that the origin of homosexuality ‘remains largely unexplained’. In an interview in 1997, the then Cardinal Ratzinger said: ‘We shuffled all hypotheses … [homosexuality] is innate or develops under certain circumstances’ (Ratzinger and Seewald 1997).

12. Terminology is important. Tendencies, acts and lifestyles are not the same (Ivereigh, de la Cierva, and Valero 2019). Be aware that some terms have an ideological orientation and semantic connotations. For instance, the expression ‘sexual orientation’ can mean very different realities: (1) complex combinations of desires and attractions; (2) sexual behaviors; and (3) a way of defining one’s
identity. It looks like a scientific term, but it is not. Nor does the distinction between ‘homosexual’ and ‘heterosexual’ describe different types of human beings. Scientific research on human sexuality indicates that sexual desires are complex phenomena, determined by many different factors, including the environment and personal experiences, which often change throughout life. The Church does not label people according to their sexual tendencies; it does not classify them as straight and homos. That’s why the Church doesn’t use terms like ‘gay’ or ‘LGBT’ in its documents. As Charles Chaput, Archbishop of Philadelphia, explained in the 2018 synod of bishops: ‘Their use would suggest that they are real and autonomous groups, and the Church simply does not categorize people in this way. There is no ‘LGBTQ Catholic’, a ‘transgender Catholic’, or a ‘heterosexual Catholic’, as if our sexual appetites defined who we are’ (Wooden 2018).

13. Preparation is also vital. Prepare your speech with care and rehearse as much as possible. Learn how to connect questions to your main messages (Ivereigh and Lopez 2015). No public intervention is risk-free, so take all requests with the same professional responsibility, whether the inquiring reporter works for The New York Times or for a local radio station in a tiny island, because its editor probably is very active on Instagram.

14. Finally, bioethics teaching is just one aspect of a broader issue, and actions count more than words. Institutional legitimacy will be confirmed or rejected depending on campus environment. Make sure the university promotes actively social, ethnic and economic integration, fights eloquently any form of discrimination, and fosters what Pope Francis calls ‘a culture of encounter’, where doctrinal issues go hand by hand with daily life (Nef Ulloa and Barbosa Guimaraes 2019; Pope Francis and Ivereigh 2020).

**Final conclusions**

1. Universities are exposed to internal and external risks that affect their normal activities, their educational goals, their financial results, and their reputation. Those risks are increasing and becoming more complex due to the acceleration of changes in their social, political and legal context (Souza 2019). Therefore, Universities need to detect those changes using contextual intelligence (Gregory and Willis 2013), evaluate their impact in advance and approach them with a strategic mindset (Fronz 2011; Caldart 2020).

2. As any other organization, universities will benefit by having a non-market strategy (De la Cierva 2018), together with their market strategy aimed at enrolling and keeping students on campus. The non-market strategy not only complements the commercial one with priorities, messages and tactics regarding university relations with the rest of stakeholders but absorbs the marketing strategy and provides it meaning and direction.

3. Every corporate strategy starts with defining the institutional purpose (Canals 2020), learning and organizing the company’s stakeholders map (Argandoña 2011; O’Riordan 2017), and designing a sustainable and coherent public narrative
(Cannata 2018). A purpose without proper integrated communications would fall short on effectiveness both internally and externally.

4. A university with Christian ethos and values should be able to articulate its identity explicitly, and make sure the consequences can be seen and appreciated in its corporate culture and its daily activities, and are projected to the external stakeholders and reflected by its perceived image (Mora 2011).

5. When involved in a controversy, organizations need to generate a compelling narrative regarding the topic. This narrative must develop valid arguments from a logical point of view (believable, well-documented reasoning, based upon facts) and persuasive from a psychological viewpoint (presented in an empathetic and well-versed manner, which includes numerous clarifying examples) covering all aspects of the controversial issue (Carroggio 2010).

6. The online world has changed how controversies evolve: faster, more aggressive and bitter, and lasting longer. These new characteristics have a particularly deep impact on organizations inspired by Christian values. What once led to criticism and polite disagreement, now may become a scandal, a negative emotional outburst, that quite often ends up in harsh punishment, deep reputation damage and even social exclusion (Elizalde 2009). For those reasons, Catholic institutions need to rethink how they contribute to social progress, what are the common values shared with others, and use this new awareness in their public discourse as the foundation for a new social legitimacy (Cannata 2014).

7. In educational institutions, it is vital for professors to know how to handle conversations on difficult topics and have different strategies to manage controversies in the classroom, to increase learning and avoid polarization (Cannata 2018).

8. Issues management programs, which include risk analysis, crisis planning and strategic thinking (Ewing 1987; Register and Larkin 2008), allow organizations that are heavily-dependent on their stakeholders like educational institutions to tackle issues in the right moment of evolution (Mitroff, Pearson, and Katharine Harrington 1997), and decide – according to their identity – whether to change and adapt, to define better their purpose and reinforce bonds with their stakeholders, or to abandon a product or a market (Griffin 2014).

9. Preventive communications included in every issues management program is the right path for corporate communication practitioners to play a significant role in the decision making process (Baskin and Aronoff 1983). They have a role to play in both identifying and preventing the problem, and in leading the organization to take the initiative and participate in the public debate before circumstances oblige to (Czarnecki 2009). Actually, issues management should be one of the most relevant functions of any corporate communicator, at least as important as media relations, investor relations, public affairs, internal communication, institutional relations or CSR. This new responsibility, together with strategic planning, had a important role for the PR profession to reach maturity (Ewing 1987).

Notes

1. From now on, we will offer some statistical information valid for the whole of Latin America, to avoid this case being attributed to any particular country. Despite the fact
that differences from country to country are undeniable, this particular nation is in the middle of the spectrum and the general statistics therefore give a wholly acceptable reflection of its status.

2. For example, according to the Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía of Mexico, the number of divorces between 1986 and 2018 has multiplied by four, although the number of marriages diminished by 3% (INEGI 2020). A similar trend can be detected in Brazil, where the Instituto Brasileño de Geografía y Estadística reported in 2018 than one of three marriages ended in divorce (IBGE 2018). In Argentina, the number of divorces since 2015, when President Cristina Fernandez changed the law in order to make divorce easier, increased by 41% in Buenos Aires alone (cf. Himitian, Evangelina y Bianca Pallaro. 2018. “Récord histórico en la ciudad en un año aumentaron un 41%.” La Nación, Dec 18).

3. Surveys show that 45.6% of births take place outside a legal marriage, and the trend between 1970 and 2015 shows a steep increase: births in consensual unions went from 16.8% to 38.9%, and the percentage of births to single mothers has doubled: from 7.3% to 15%. These figures show that the conception and education of children in marriage no longer prevails in Latin America (Castro Martín et al. 2011).

4. Recent studies indicate that 6.5 million abortions were procured in Latin America and the Caribbean in the period 2010–2014, a number notoriously bigger than the 4.4 million performed 10 years earlier (1990–1994). Cf. Guttmacher Institute, March 2018.

5. One of the main claims of gays and lesbians is in the legal recognition of same-sex unions as full-effect marriages. In Latin America, this is true of Argentina and [some states of] Mexico (2010), Uruguay and Brazil (2013), Puerto Rico (2015), Colombia (2016), Ecuador (2019), Costa Rica (2020) and Belize (2021). Today, however, Barbados, Bolivia, Chile, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Jamaica, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, the Dominican Republic and Venezuela (although the first three do provide them legal protection as civil unions). Colonial territories (Aruba, Curacao, Guadeloupe, Martinique, Falklands, Suriname, Virgin Islands, etc.) follow the laws of their respective metropolitans. At the other extreme, homosexual relations are considered a crime in nine countries in Latin America and the Caribbean, including Jamaica and Guiana.

6. Cf. Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992), nos. 2357–2359. This Catholic assessment has recently been confirmed by the Vatican’s doctrinal office: ‘Responsum of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith to a dubium regarding the blessing of the unions of persons of the same sex’, 15 March 2021.

7. ‘The Church (…) celebrates the divine plan of the loving and live-giving union of men and women in the sacrament of marriage. (…) her clear position cannot be revised by pressure from civil legislation or the trend of the moment.’ Congregation for the doctrine of the faith. 1986. ‘Letter to the bishops of the Catholic Church on the pastoral care of homosexual persons’, November 1: 7–9.

8. Congregation for the doctrine of the faith. 2003. ‘Considerations regarding proposals to give legal recognition to unions between homosexual persons’, June 3. The document is signed by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, and points out that ‘the Sovereign Pontiff John Paul II, in the Audience of March 28, 2003, approved the present Considerations, adopted in the Ordinary Session of this Congregation, and ordered their publication’.

9. ‘[Marriage] is not a simple social convention, but rather the fundamental cell of every society. Consequently, policies which undermine the family threaten human dignity and the future of humanity itself. (…) Creatures differ from one another and can be protected, or endangered, in different ways, as we know from daily experience. One such attack comes from laws or proposals which, in the name of fighting discrimination, strike at the biological basis of the difference between the sexes. I am thinking, for example, of certain countries in Europe, or North and South America’. Benedict XVI, address to the members of the Diplomatic Corps, 11-1-2010. It was a not-so-disguised reference to those countries in Europe and the Americas giving legal recognition as a marriage to
same-sex unions. Cf. also his book-interview with Peter Seewald, *Light of the World* (Ratzinger and Seewald 2010).

10. 'There are absolutely no grounds for considering homosexual unions to be in any way similar or even remotely analogous to God’s plan for marriage and family.' It is unacceptable ‘that local Churches should be subjected to pressure in this matter and that international bodies should make financial aid to poor countries dependent on the introduction of laws to establish ‘marriage’ between persons of the same sex'. Francis. 2016. *Amoris laetitia*. March 19: 251. The Pope is here quoting one of the recommendations of the Synod of bishops held in Rome the previous year.

11. It would seem (the conditional is required, since the Vatican has not officially commented on this, despite numerous requests from bishops and media) that the Argentinian pope, in an interview with Valentina Alazraki, the Televisa correspondent in Rome, and speaking in his native language, distinguishes between marriage (only between a man and a woman) and ‘una ley de convivencia civil’, literally a ‘law of civil cohabitation’, commonly called a civil union. One of the differences, for instance, would be that civil unions don’t have a right to adopt children. When Alazraki reminded him that, when he was Archbishop of Buenos Aires, he opposed gay marriage, Francis responded: ‘I am a conservative. I’ve always defended doctrine. And it is curious about the law on homosexual marriage — it is a contradiction to speak of homosexual marriage. But what we have to create is a civil union law, that way they are legally covered. I defended that’ (Wooden, Cindy. 2020. “Transcript Shows Pope’s Distinction between Gay Marriage, Civil Unions.” *Crux Now*, October 27). These statements, released in 2020, were seen as an official support for same-sex civil unions (Cf. Winfield, Nicole. 2020. “Francis Becomes 1st Pope to Endorse Same-Sex Civil Unions.” *Associated Press*, October 21.) A few days later, on November 2, 2020, the Vatican’s Secretariat of State confirmed that interpretation: in a letter to papal nuncios, it clarified that the Pope opposed homosexual marriage and made clear he was referring to civil union laws, which some countries have enacted to regulate benefits such as health care. ‘It is clear that Pope Francis was referring to certain state provisions and certainly not the doctrine of the Church, which he has reaffirmed numerous times over the years’, the letter said. The statement struck many observers as a shift for the Catholic Church – which in the above-mentioned document from 2003 came out against any ‘legal recognition of homosexual unions’.

12. 'Sometimes the term ‘disordered’ is misunderstood as if it were an (offensive) description of the person, as if he or she were “sin”, or as if any tendency towards the other sex is blameless. It’s not enough for a sexual inclination to be heterosexual to make it moral. Pornography, premarital relationships, adultery, polygamy or sex with a minor are examples of disorderly heterosexual activities. But this does not include any moral judgment on the person, let alone hold them accountable for that tendency. Feeling this tendency is not a sin and is perfectly compatible with the highest degree of virtue: with holiness. Certainly, the term “disordered” may sound gravely offensive in light of homophobic insults throughout history. In fact, it is an adjective used for centuries in moral theology, before the modern science of psychiatry existed, and is not related to medical persecutions of homosexuals of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Homophobic language applies the term “deviated” to the homosexual person; the Church, on the other hand, talks about acts, not about people’ (Ivereigh, de la Cierva, and Valero 2019).

13. The causes of same-sex attraction and the role played by different factors (biological, social, personal behavior) in determining sexual orientation is an oft-debated issue in both the popular media and research communities, and evaluating the literature on the topic is quite daunting, because there is no scientific consensus. To mention two extremes: some authors (Weill 2008; Savic, García-Falgueras, and Swaab 2010) affirm there is no evidence at all of anything after birth affecting sexual orientation, while other research since the 1980s provide evidence on the contrary (Bell, Weinberg, and
Hammersmith 1981, Van Wyk and Geist 1984). Research to find a “gay gene,” which could explain the genetic origin of homosexuality, has not paid off at the moment.

14. Two samples. At least eight studies on monozygotic twins (those with identical genetic heritage), conducted in Australia, the United States and Scandinavia over the past two decades, show that if an identical twin is same-sex, the chance of his twin having the same attraction is only 11% for men and 14% for women. These data indicate that genetic factors cannot be the only explanation: ‘The predominant factors that create homosexuality in one identical twin and not in the other should be postnatal factors’ (Whitehead 2011). In addition, scientific research on human sexuality indicates that sexual desires are complex and difficult-to-measure phenomena, and that they are determined by many different factors, including the environment and experiences themselves; and that often change throughout life. These findings match research in neuroscience, which shows that the brain can be reconfigured over time through vital experiences such as behaviors and habits. ‘The human libido is not a hardwired, invariable biological urge but can be curiously fickle, easily altered by our psychology and the history of our sexual encounters (...) Sexual taste is influenced by culture and experience, and what is practiced then shapes the brain’ (Doidge 2014).

15. For instance, in his very last address to the diplomatic corps accredited to the Holy See, Pope John Paul II said: ‘Today the family is often threatened by social and cultural pressures that tend to undermine its stability, but in some countries the family is also threatened by legislation which – at times directly – challenge its natural structure, which is and must necessarily be that of a union between a man and a woman founded on marriage’. Under the title ‘Pope Denounces Gay Marriage’, Jason Horowitz wrote on The New York Times: ‘Pope John Paul II unequivocally condemned gay marriage and weighed in on a host of other social questions on Monday in a strongly worded message meant to define the position and agenda of the Roman Catholic Church’ (Horowitz, J. 2005. “Pope Denounces Gay Marriage.” The New York Times, November 1). Then, the Human Rights Campaign issued a statement condemning the Pope’s words: ‘Our families are threatened by a lack of legal protections said HRC’s Lisa Bennett in a statement issued right after John Paul’s speech’ (HRC’s responds to Pope’s comments on marriage, 10 June 2005).

16. For instance: On 4 November 2005, the Vatican issued the ‘Instruction Concerning the Criteria for the Discernment of Vocations With Regard to Persons With Homosexual Tendencies in View of their Admission to the Seminary and to Holy Orders’. The nine-page-long document said the Church cannot allow the priestly ordination of men who are active homosexuals, who have homosexual tendencies or who support the ‘gay culture.’ British newspaper The Independent commented: ‘The Catholic Church has forcefully restated its hostility to homosexuals, banning them from studying to become priests even if they declare they do not intend to become sexually active’ (Popham, P. 2005. “Pope Restates Ban on Gay Priests and Says Homosexuality Is ‘Disordered’.” The Independent, November 30. Given that the document was the first major one released by Joseph Ratzinger as Pope, the paper continued: ‘The document scotches any hope that homosexuals may have had that the Catholic Church under Pope Benedict might become more accommodating’.

17. ‘There is a basic incoherence between the Pope’s words and the Church’s teaching on homosexuality that in reality present serious moral dilemmas for Catholic mothers and fathers of LGBTQ children. At the end, it leaves parents with more questions than answers, and leaves children with continued vulnerability. (...) Family is the center and the heart of the LGBTQ movement’s quest for equality. The pontiff’s statement denigrates millions of children raised by LGBTQ parents, including those with unmarried heterosexual parents. Our children don’t deserve this.’ ‘Seven Quotes That Make Pope Francis Complicated for LGBTQ People’, Human Rights Campaign (n.d.). More recently, in occasion of the CDF document mentioned in note No. 6, instructing Catholic priests not to offer blessings for same-sex couples because ‘God cannot bless sin. To the shock of LGBTQ + Catholics and allies globally, Pope Francis approved the decree. That
approval is a betrayal, despite the many liberal-leaning LGBTQ-positive pronouncements heard during his papacy.' Monroe, Irene. 2021. ‘Pope Francis Flip-Flops On LGBTQ Church Inclusion — Again.’ GBH News, March 25.

18. As part of the discussion of gay marriage in Peru in 2014 (a measure which was not legally approved), the writer stated: "Right now, in the predictable debate that this bill has provoked, the Peruvian Episcopal Conference, in a statement showing an antiquated attitude and gross ignorance, states that homosexuality would ‘contradict the natural order’, ‘attack human dignity’ and ‘threaten the sound orientation of children. (…). There is nothing that exaggerates sex life so much and comes to derail it to sometimes dizzying extremes more than repression and denial of sex. Shaken as it is by the cases of pedophilia that have affected it over almost the whole world, the Catholic Church should understand it better than anyone else and act accordingly in the face of this issue, that is, in a more modern and tolerant way.” Mario Vargas Llosa. 2014. “Salir de la barbarie.” El País, April 20.

19. Cf. Connaughton, Aidan. 2020. “Religiously Unaffiliated People More Likely Than Those with a Religion to Lean Left, Accept Homosexuality.” Pew Research Center. September 28.

20. Cf. Maldonado, Arturo. 2015. “How People Across Americas View Same Sex Marriage.” Vanderbilt University, June 1. Some of those percentages are remarkable: Argentina (80%), Mexico (72%) and Brazil (71%). Cf. Diamant, Jeff. 2020. “How Catholics around the World See Same-Sex Marriage, Homosexuality.” Pew Research Center, November 2.

21. Despite the fact that the document mentioned in note 5 was published by indication of Pope Francis, a number of cardinals and quite a few bishops rejected its guidelines and actively promoted different acts of resistance. From the moral point of view, theological dissent does not affect doctrine, but from a communications point view, it shows that the issue is not settled, and discussions will continue for a long time.

22. There is no official document stating which position a Catholic university should take in teaching about homosexuality. The legal and moral framework for Catholic Universities' identity and activities is the apostolic constitution Ex Corde Ecclesiae, issued by John Paul II in 1990. The Polish pope reminds Catholic Universities that they are called to a continuous renewal, both as ‘Universities’ and as ‘Catholic’. For, ‘What is at stake is the very meaning of scientific and technological research, of social life and of culture, but, on an even more profound level, what is at stake is the very meaning of the human person’ (10), but it doesn’t specify more (which, in itself, shows how fast our society has changed in one generation).

23. This is not the case for all Catholic universities around the globe. Quite a few reject the official Catholic position on this matter, like, for instance, the Sacred Heart University (Connecticut, USA) which even boasts about it: cf. “Catholic University in New England ‘Affirms Support’ for LGBT Persons.” 2021. CNA, April 24.

24. Those situations regard practical questions, so there is a wide range of accommodating options available to avoid confrontation: cf., for instance, some suggestions offered by the Ontario Human Rights Commission. Nevertheless, since these elements were not an issue in the specific case involving the Universidad de América del Sur (and because of lack of space) we won’t comment on those aspects in this case study but will be the main topic for a future research paper.

25. For instance, according to New Ways Ministry (an advocacy organization for LGBTQ Catholics), nearly two-thirds of the 230 Catholic colleges in United States have some kind of program, policy, or project that affirms LGBTQ students; about half of the Catholic universities in that country offer a university-recognized LGBTQ club. (Cf. ‘LGBTQ-friendly Catholic colleges and universities’, n.d.). Some universities also offer an LGBTQ resource center with hired full-time staff members dedicated to student services: Georgetown, Loyola Marymount University, Fordham, Marquette, DePaul University, Boston College, Seattle University, etc. Cf. Zakrzewski, Cat. 2013. “Catholic Colleges Respond to Demand for LGBTQ Resources.” US Today, August 12. Finally, Notre Dame University offers a special pastoral program for same-sex orientation
There are also business schools with the same approach: for instance, McDonough School of Business, associated to Georgetown University. Cf. Spencer, Kyle. 2013. “A Rainbow Over Catholic Colleges.” The New York Times, July 30; and Odell, Catherine. 2010. “Welcome Is Mixed for Gays in Catholic Campuses.” National Catholic Reporter, November 15.

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