ABSTRACT
This paper endeavors to provide, through a selection of eight topics, some of the most significant issues and events related to Catholic Church Communications in 2015. The selection is of course subjective and limited due to the scope of the paper, but the authors have chosen these topics either because they received wide media coverage or because they have long-term and significant implications for the Church and for society. The highlights are: The publication of Pope Francis's second encyclical, Laudato Si'; The immigration and refugee crises; The papal visit to the United States; The Ordinary Synod of Bishops on the Family; The persecution of Christians and battles over religious liberty; Efforts to legalize gay marriage; The various controversies and scandals besetting the Vatican; Developments with regard to the legalization and promotion of physician-assisted suicide.

Introduction

Composing any sort of annual summary of Catholic Church Communication highlights a daunting proposition. The Church is a universal and multi-faceted institution operating at the most local levels and at most universal.

Such a selection of highlights must be to a certain extent highly subjective and, for reasons of space, selective. We have chosen topics that are critical from a communications’ perspective for one of two reasons: either the topic was receiving wide coverage in the general media or it was significant in terms of the priorities of the Catholic Church. For either or both of these reasons, church leaders and communication professionals were likely to find themselves addressing these issues in 2015.

We have picked eight topics to highlight:

- The publication of Pope Francis’s second encyclical, Laudato Si’
- The immigration and refugee crises
- The papal visit to the United States
- The ordinary synod of bishops on the family
- The persecution of Christians and battles over religious liberty
• Efforts to legalize gay marriage
• The various controversies and scandals besetting the Vatican
• Developments with regard to the legalization and promotion of physician-assisted suicide

These topics dominated headlines (Pope’s trip to the United States, the synod, the encyclical, various Vatican controversies), or have long-term implications for the Church and society (immigration, persecution, changing views of homosexuality, assisted-suicide and euthanasia).

Of course, there are many other topics that we have chosen not to address: the impact of terrorism, papal trips to Latin America, and Asia, the Year for Consecrated Life, clergy sexual abuse, the growing campaign against the death penalty and more. In addition, this report admittedly has a primarily northern and western hemispheric focus for reasons of space and resources. Except for the papal visit to the United States, however, most of these issues either have global implications now or will soon have such implications.

Two developments that perhaps merited further discussion were the Vatican’s Media Commission looking at the reorganization of the Vatican’s diverse media operations, and the Year of Mercy.

The Year of Mercy was launched on December 8 at a ceremony in St. Peter’s Square. Announced only earlier that year, it was the responsibility of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, which has coordinated a worldwide celebration of the special jubilee year. Coming at a time of increasing international military and economic tension, concerns about refugees and the migrant crisis, and persecution, the Year of Mercy arrives at a providential time and has attracted widespread attention. However, because the Year of Mercy primarily falls in 2016, we felt it was best considered a topic when the highlights of 2016 are summarized.

Regarding the Media Committee, its final report was given to Pope Francis and the Council of Cardinals in February 2015. Its report was adopted and subsequently a series of appointments was announced for a new Secretariat of Communications headed by Msgr. Dario Vigano, formerly the head of the Vatican’s television operations. The actual work of restructuring and better coordinating the various media enterprises, however, is work that is taking place now and its significant changes were scheduled to occur in 2016.

What can be said is that the Vatican at its highest levels has affirmed the importance of its media outreach by creating a secretariat and committing itself to a more professional, better coordinated, media enterprise involving print, television, radio, and all forms of digital communication. This is good news for all those working in journalism, media and communications, for it will allow all of us to do our jobs better, whether we are reporting on the Church or working for it.

**Pope Francis’s *Laudato Si’* impacts climate debate**

One of the most divisive topics for Catholics today is the environment — and it was into this powder keg that Pope Francis waded with the release of his 2015 encyclical on creation, *Laudato Si’: On Care for Our Common Home.’*
From a communications standpoint, the release of the encyclical had the potential to be explosive. Months before the document was made public, criticisms were mounting about the document’s inroads into policy that could, then, only be hypothesized. A piece in a ‘First Things’ blog by Maureen Mullarkey said this of Francis: ‘He is an ideologue and a meddlesome egoist. His clumsy intrusion into the Middle East and covert collusion with Obama over Cuba makes that clear. Megalomaniac sends him galloping into geopolitical — and now meteorological — thickets, sacralizing politics and bending theology to premature, intemperate policy endorsements.’ (First Things, incidentally, ended its relationship with Mullarkey a few short months later, after repeated criticisms of the Pope.)

Steve Moore, writing for Forbes, was just as blunt: ‘Pope Francis — and I say this as a Catholic — is a complete disaster when it comes to his public policy pronouncements. On the economy, and even more so on the environment, the Pope has allied himself with the far left and has embraced an ideology that would make people poorer and less free.’ These viewpoints are not unique to these two commentators, both in Catholic and secular publications.

With a potential public relations catastrophe waiting in the wings — and with some waiting for it all too eagerly — the Vatican’s roll-out of Laudato Si’ had to be carefully planned and executed. For its preemptive strike, the Vatican communications team invited four experts to be present at a news conference on the morning of the June 18 release. The carefully selected speakers included:

- His Eminence, the Metropolitan of Pergamo, John Zizioulas, representing the Ecumenical Patriarch of the Orthodox Church, who spoke on the theology and spirituality with which the Encyclical opens and closes;
- Prof. John Schellnhuber, founder and director of the Postdam Institute for Climate Impact Research, a representative of the natural sciences;
- Dr. Carolyn Woo, president of Catholic Relief Services, who represents the economic, financial, business and commercial sectors whose responses to the major environmental challenges are so crucial;
- Valeria Martano, a teacher from Rome who has witnessed ‘human and environmental degradation’ and is familiar with best practices.

Each expert brought a measured, sensible voice to different portions of the encyclical and assisted the Vatican in presenting a united front on a controversial topic. According to Vatican Radio, ‘the speakers demonstrated that the Encyclical, from the very beginning, seeks to establish a dialogue with all, both individuals as well as the organizations and institutions that share the same concerns as the pope, approached from different perspectives, in a global situation that renders them increasingly intertwined and complementary.’

But for every criticism bestowed on Laudato Si’ came multiple accolades that recognized Pope Francis and the Catholic Church as a powerful influencer in international environmental policy. Vatican communications and the pontiff stayed on message during Pope Francis’ travels to South America, Africa and the United States, where he referred many times to his encyclical and the responsibility each citizen has to work
together for the good of creation. The messaging earned him a multitude of praise among secular Western media and NGOs, as well as many political leaders.

Further attention came when the Vatican declared Sept. 1 the ‘World Day of Prayer for the Care of Creation,’ earning another moment in the international spotlight, at least in Catholic media.

There is little doubt that the Vatican’s strategic introduction and communication of the contents of Laudato Si’ had a profound effect on the climate talks in Paris in December 2015. Were it not for Pope Francis’ leadership in this area — and the communications apparatus that backed him up — the gathering may have not been as successful.

Francis’ influence in the debate was recorded by Joe Ware, writing for The Tablet:

In his speech, the President of Paraguay, Horacio Manuel Cartes, said: In his encyclical Laudato Si, his Holiness Pope Francis, gave a dramatic warning that we face a crisis and need to protect the world upon which we rely for life. He highlighted that we have never harmed our common home like we have in the past two centuries.

The Catholic voice was also heard even more directly at the summit with the address by the Vatican’s Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin on behalf of Pope Francis. A longtime observer state of the UN climate talks, this was the first time that the Vatican had used this formal status as a platform to speak to the conference, known as COP 21.

Speaking up for the poor and the yet unborn he said ‘the people most vulnerable to the impact of the phenomenon of climate change are the poorest and future generations, who suffer the gravest consequences, often without bearing any responsibility.’

Two conclusions can be drawn from the release of Laudato Si’: First, Pope Francis has expanded his impact as leader of the Church. Not only is he filling a traditional role of the papacy in terms of providing moral leadership, but he has also shown his ability to directly influence policy and insert the Church in one of the most important contemporary issues facing the world community.

Second, the Vatican’s communications strategy for the release of the encyclical was well thought out, multi-channel and consistently on message. This enhanced the impact of the Pope’s message and extended his reach far beyond the usual readers of such papal documents.

The world’s overwhelming migration crisis

In 2015, the war in Syria entered into its fourth grueling year, with no end in sight. An inevitable and tragic consequence of the conflict have been the more than 4 million Syrian refugees who have fled their home country seeking refuge elsewhere in the Middle East or in the world — primarily Europe — according to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees.

More than 1 million refugees and migrants from war-torn parts of the Middle East and Africa have made their way to Europe in 2015 alone. (Worldwide estimates of displaced peoples – both internal and external – puts the number at well over 50 million.)

These numbers are unprecedented, said Leonard Doyle, spokesman for the International Organization for Migration, told The Guardian in January 2015. In terms of refugees and migrants, nothing has been seen like this since World War II, and even then [the flow of migration] was in the opposite direction.
The reasons for this flight are numerous and complex, ranging from war to terror to poverty, and intertwining the ‘refugee’ and the ‘migrant’ into a strange new and interconnected category.

The Church has been consistent and clear on its teaching of care for migrants and refugees, but perhaps never more so than under the leadership of Pope Francis, who has spoken repeatedly and passionately on the subject. The Holy Father has made the plight of migrants a focus of his pontificate ever since he chose the destination of his first pastoral trip outside of Rome as Lampedusa, where he prayed at the water’s edge for the many migrants who have died in the treacherous sea crossing, and the news media has shown pictures of drowned children tragically washing up on Europe’s shores. Francis has consistently pleaded with the international community to take more of a role in the care for these men, women and families. In 2015, the pope specifically targeted the Church, asking that ‘every parish, every religious community, every monastery, every sanctuary of Europe’ open their doors to one family of refugees.

‘Before the tragedy of tens of thousands of refugees fleeing death in conflict and hunger and are on a journey of hope, the Gospel calls us to be close to the smallest and to those who have been abandoned,’ he said.

Following the appeal by Pope Francis, the Vatican itself welcomed a refugee family of its own, offering shelter to a Syrian Christian family.

But despite repeated pleas and the example of the Vatican, the Church’s response to Francis’ request for welcome has been mixed. Some bishops have been quick to open their doors and institutions; others, under pressure from government leaders and local faithful, have not. This resistance leads to the crux of the 21st-century migration crisis: what many would call its incompatibility with homeland security. A fear of terrorism by Muslim extremists has led some political leaders and parties to declare their desire only to accept Christians into their countries — despite the fact that the vast majority of those in flight are Muslims who are being targeted by Muslim extremists.

Such fears even spilled over into the United States, where the Church became embroiled directly in a struggle between refugees and national security when Archbishop Joseph Tobin of Indianapolis, Indiana, defied the request of state governor Mike Pence and went forward with the resettlement of Syrian refugees in late 2015. Such a conflict is indicative of the tensions between Church and state on issues of all immigration, but is more keenly felt during this current era of terror.

It is perhaps both fitting and ironic, then, that the Church entered into the Year of Mercy — a time when the corporal works of mercy, including that of welcoming the stranger, are being prioritized — amid fears of terrorism around the world.

What complicates the refugee crisis is that wide scale economic displacement is also leading to a growing migration of peoples. Some of this economic displacement is a result of violence and corruption, which makes even economic migrants refugees from hostile environments. Pope Francis acknowledged as much during his recent message for the Vatican’s World Day of Migrants and Refugees when he called for aid at the points of origin for the refugees: ‘It is necessary to avert, if possible at the earliest stages, the flight of refugees and departures as a result of poverty, violence, and persecution,’ The pope said.
Pope Francis triumphant Cuba and U.S. visit

If the goal of Church communications is to enthusiastically present the face of the Church to the world, no one is more skilled at this task than Pope Francis himself. His visit to Cuba – after having helped initiate talks between the United States and Cuba after decades of hostility – and then his travel to the United States in September 2015 provided him with the platform to do just that. For the trip to succeed, the Pope had to avoid the plethora of pitfalls awaiting him from the moment he deplaned in Washington, D.C., on Sept. 22.

Hampered by a rising secularism and still dogged by the clergy sexual abuse crisis, the Catholic Church in America desperately needed not only a personal boost from Pope Francis’ trip, it needed a national public relations triumph. This, it turns out, was exactly what it received.

Throughout his six-day visit to Washington, D.C., New York City and Philadelphia, Pope Francis was, simply put, a media darling, winning over reporters, producers, editors and bloggers with his effervescence, his stirring and inspiring messages to the Church, nation and world, and his moments of personal encounter with all he met.

News stories from The New York Times, a publication that finds itself more at odds with the Church than not, claimed that the pontiff ‘demonstrated a nuanced political dexterity’ during his time in the United States, adding that he ‘wowed Washington and New York, while leaving behind a downtown Philadelphia transformed into a ‘Francisville’ of pilgrims, families and hawkers selling Francis swag,’ that is, souvenirs and memorabilia.

‘I was frankly taken aback at how savvy he was,’ Stephen Schneck, the director of the Institute for Policy Research and Catholic Studies at the Catholic University of America, told The New York Times. ‘He was clearly aware of all the very divisive issues for Catholics in American public life but talked about them in a way that didn’t give ammunition to either conservatives or progressives in the United States to use in their political wars.’

But Francis wasn’t only communicating the message of the Church via the political savvy that helped him navigate high-profile speeches to the U.S. Congress and the United Nations. Pope Francis conveyed the message of the Church — that is, the love of Christ for all people — through his every intimate interaction with those he encountered: Children in a school in Harlem. Families of victims of the 9/11 attacks. Homeless at a soup kitchen. A disabled boy on the tarmac in Philadelphia. Even while riding through crowds in his popemobile, Pope Francis conveyed a warmth and love for each person present, and the world took notice.

Even the Holy Father’s primary mode of transportation added to the media’s heart-warming narrative. National Public Radio devoted an entire 800-word story to teasing out the symbolism behind the pope’s small, black Fiat — including tying it to Mary’s ‘fiat’ to the Angel Gabriel in the Gospel of Luke.

What you are seeing is the personal encounter that he’s been talking about during this entire trip, Bill Newbrough, a Philadelphia resident, told National Public Radio. He touched you and everyone here.

Key also to the success of Pope Francis’ trip was work done with media ahead of the visit. Before the pope ever set foot in the United States, the organizers of the
visit — among them the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops’ Media Relations team — had to ensure that the pope’s message be communicated effectively by the right people at the right time — which was no easy task. According to the USCCB, nearly 8,000 media applied for credentials to cover the pope while he was in the country, and each had to be processed and granted or denied access to a limited number of papal venues.

To prepare reporters and editors working specifically on the religion beat, a good portion of the Religion Newswriters Association’s annual conference in August 2015 dealt with everything from how to cover a papal visit to a session on Pope Francis and the meaning of Family.

Also, in the spring of 2015, Catholic Voices USA, a lay-run group specializing in public relations, ran workshops to give everyday Catholics the language to effectively communicate the Church to the media following Francis’ visit.

‘We know so many Catholics who are on fire for their faith, who can explain it well and know why they are Catholic. We want to make sure that those voices get out there,’ Kim Daniels, senior adviser of Catholic Voices USA, told the National Catholic Register.

Did such preparation pay off? It’s possible. More likely, however, it was Pope Francis himself who most effectively communicated the Church’s message during his U.S. visit. When scholars and the media look back on the pope’s 2015 visit to the United States, there will be a temptation to quantify the impact the trip made on Catholicism in the United States. Did fallen away Catholics return to the sacraments? Was there an increase in baptisms or marriages? Was the tide of rising secularism stemmed in the West? Such results are as difficult to measure as they are unlikely to occur in any way that might be at all quantifiable.

But did Pope Francis’ pastoral visit give the Catholic Church in America — so often put into a box or ignored — a fresh face? Did it help soften hearts or begin to heal wounds for those with anti-Catholic sentiments? Did it make the American faithful, who so often feel ostracized because of their faith, proud instead? Without a doubt.

Pope Francis came to the United States to communicate a message of love, and in that, he made his mark.

**Family conflict: a synod exposes the fault lines**

Synods are an ancient practice of bringing bishops together for consultation on matters important to the Church. In announcing not one but two synods on the family in 2013, Pope Francis made it clear from early in his pontificate that he wanted a more open synodal process than has been the case for the last 35 years. As he told an Italian newspaper in 2014, ‘Open and fraternal debate makes theological and pastoral thought grow. That doesn’t frighten me. What’s more, I look for it.’

The 2014 Extraordinary Synod was unusual in that it was preceded by a worldwide survey of episcopal conferences about the issues they saw confronting the modern family. A similar process had been undertaken in Latin America in advance of the Aparecida document in which Cardinal Jorge Bergoglio had played a key role. These surveys formed the basis of the preparatory document for the synod and painted a broad picture of the state of the family and the challenges it is facing.
The extraordinary synod itself, however, was not a model of transparency. It remained closed to the media, but when the midterm report (or relatio) was released, there was a very public explosion. Critics, including those inside the synod hall, said that it did not reflect the substance of the conversation, and seemed to reflect a more progressive agenda on such issues as cohabitation, gay marriage, and reception of the divorced and remarried at the Eucharist. This debate impacted the final text of the relatio, which was in turn to become the basis for the work in the 2015 Ordinary Synod on the Family.

The 2014 synod ended with an eloquent address by Pope Francis criticizing both sides of the debate and urging them to move beyond the divisions, but the damage had been done. Media coverage reported on the relatio, thus feeding expectations and concerns about the agenda of the synod’s organizers. Critics of the 2014 synod included Russell Shaw, former spokesperson for the U.S. bishops, who described the synod as ‘one of the strangest examples of Church miscommunication in many a year.’ One Catholic observer, Edward Pentin, even published a book about the ‘hijacking of the synod’ (The Rigging of a Vatican Synod: An Investigation into Alleged Manipulation at the Extraordinary Synod on the Family, Ignatius Press, 2015). And those who saw themselves as defending Church teachings as traditionally understood began preparing for the next synod.

Thus was the stage set for the 2015 Ordinary Synod on the Family. This synod had a much larger number of bishops. The Instrumentum Laboris, or working document, which followed from the final report of the Extraordinary Synod, was the primary text that the synod was to work from.

Continuing debating points made during the first synod, some bishops criticized the document for a variety of flaws, including the fact that it led with sociological observations rather than scripture, and that it made numerous assumptions that some groups of synod fathers felt were unjustified.

Leading up to the synod, Pope Francis surprised everyone by releasing two motu proprios or apostolic letters announcing new procedures for annulments. These procedures streamlined the process, forbade the charging of fees for the process, and gave the local bishop greater leeway in hearing marriage cases. While the changes did not specifically address the issue of Communion for the divorced and remarried, they did attempt to make the annulment process more flexible and more pastorally responsive.

This announcement did little to mollify the various factions and, according to press reports, bishops on both sides of the more neuralgic issues held closed-door meetings of their own in advance of the synod.

The 2015 synod began October 4 and was immediately beset by controversy with the leak of a draft letter signed by 13 cardinals and addressed to the pope that was critical of elements of the synodal planning and process. Who leaked the letter and for what purpose has not been revealed, but it provided a lens for media observers to analyze the various factions. Indeed, while press coverage tended to focus on conservative and liberal factions, other important groupings in the synod hall included trans-national groupings such as the African, Asian and Eastern European bishops who banded together on some issues, or the Western European and Latin Americans who did as well. The synod itself was marked by a wide-ranging discussion.
Assessments of the synod varied, but by the end, the votes on the individual paragraphs revealed a strong consensus for all but three statements. As would be expected, those deemed more liberal and those deemed more conservative differed on the conclusions to be drawn.

Observers like John Allen expressed concern about how the bishops – their divisions now quite public – move forward: ‘Specifically, the question is whether Catholics will allow the divisions that surfaced at the synods to become all-consuming, triggering a cycle of tribal combat, or if they’ll try to forge a deeper spirit of common cause, more lasting for being clear-eyed and realistic.’

Others, like Christopher Ruddy, writing in Commonweal, talked about the ‘unforced errors’ of the synod and worried about their lasting impact.

As the Church awaits a final document, or Apostolic Exhortation, from Pope Francis that will presumably build on, but also draw conclusions regarding, the synodal recommendations, there is already a lesson to be taken away from this new era of Church synods regarding transparency.

The Vatican under Pope Francis seems to be trying to respond to a growing demand for greater transparency in Church processes. Following in the wake of the sexual abuse crisis, which resulted in widespread condemnation of Church secrecy in how it handled – or mishandled – accusations of sexual abuse, both the news media and ordinary Catholics are far more likely to expect – even demand – greater openness on the part of Church leaders. While even critics of the synod process praise elements of its reform under Francis, the interventions, both written and oral, remain veiled. Secrecy in turn begets rumors and gossip, all of which helped to feed the often exaggerated debate about where the synod was headed. With a lack of transparency, rumors and gossip can be wielded like weapons, anonymously wounding opponents without any sort of accountability.

Transparency does have risks, to be sure. Even if Pope Francis is comfortable with debate and division, not all bishops are. Debate also can be misinterpreted by the media and confusions sown among believers regarding what is subject to discussion and possible reform and what is not.

The answer, however, may not be tighter control limiting access by media, but a more sophisticated media operation that can provide background information and authoritative updates in a timely manner. The Vatican press operation at times did much better than in previous media events at attempting to provide such context. With the Ordinary Synod, it also improved its selection of speakers at the daily press conferences, presenting a range of opinions that – it was felt – better reflected what was occurring in the hall.

The lesson for Church communicators is that media operations – and those who plan their strategy – must become better at crisis management as they attempt to win credibility by being even-handed and open in how they present information and provide background. Church leaders who in many parts of the developed world find themselves with fewer Church-owned media channels to reach their own people must become more sophisticated at dealing with the secular media while at the same time committing themselves to the ultimate Gospel teaching when it comes to communications: ‘The truth will set us free.’
For Synod organizers, there is more room for improvement. More openness in the process leading up to the synod as well as more openness in the synod itself is important. But too must better support functions for the synod fathers.

For example, despite the vaunted translation resources of the Vatican, the paragraphs in the final statement were not translated into specific languages for the bishops to engage. Indeed, the English-language document was not released until two months after the close of the synod. This put enormous pressure on those language groups that did not have ready familiarity with Italian, and continued the sense of unease or even distrust that some had with synodal process. Some bishops expressed concern about the nuances of what they were voting on in the final document.

Whatever the lasting impact of the two synods on the family, Pope Francis has begun the process of opening up the synod process with his invitation to ‘open and fraternal debate’ among the synod fathers.

**Religious freedom conflicts, both lethal and legal**

The year 2015 was particularly brutal for Christians. A March 15 attack by the Taliban killed 17 people and injured dozens more when two suicide bombers detonated themselves outside of St. John Catholic Church and Christ Church in Lahore, Pakistan. Nearly 150 students were killed when Kenya’s Garissa University College fell into the hands of the Muslim extremist group al-Shabab in April. Out of the 700 students taken hostage, only the Christians were executed. Terrorists with the Islamic State brutally executed 12 Christians when they refused to convert to Islam in August, including a 12-year-old boy. These are only three of many, many more examples.

While the Catholic Church under Pope Francis has made profound steps forward in the areas of encounter, dialogue and world concern for the environment, Pope Francis and other Church leaders have found it difficult to reduce the persecution of Christians or to build effective international consensus on behalf of Christians — particularly in the Middle East, but also in many other areas of the world.

It’s not for lack of trying, however. Since the beginning of his pontificate, the Holy Father repeatedly has implored the international community to take action on assisting the men and women being attacked, killed or driven from their homes in the birthplace of Christianity. One of his most compelling efforts came in July 2015 while on tour in Bolivia when the Holy Father called the persecution ‘genocide.’

Today we are dismayed to see how in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world many of our brothers and sisters are persecuted, tortured and killed for their faith in Jesus, he said. This too needs to be denounced: in this third world war, waged piecemeal, which we are now experiencing, a form of genocide is taking place, and it must end.

Such terminology by the leader of the Catholic Church has bolstered some governmental leaders in the United States, the European Union and elsewhere to push for the word ‘genocide’ to be used in official governmental classification when speaking of persecution of Christians and other religious minorities in the Middle East. Such efforts paid off in early 2016, when leaders in the EU unanimously voted in favor of using the word.
‘We need the international community to clearly state what is happening in the Middle East is a genocide, that all possible actions will be taken to bring this to an end and that no matter how long it takes those responsible will be brought to justice,’ said Rob Flello, Catholic MP for Stoke-on-Trent, England, as reported in The Tablet.

But despite such efforts, a unified and energized response from the international community has not emerged. A ray of hope could be seen in December of 2015 when a group of 14 scholars who had studied Christian persecution in as many as 30 countries around the world gathered in Rome to present their findings. Called ‘Under Caesar’s Sword,’ the project was a joint partnership between two American groups: the Center for Civil and Human Rights at the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Indiana, and the Religious Freedom Project at the Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs at Georgetown University in Washington, D.C. In an interview with Our Sunday Visitor after the event, Daniel Philpott, fellow of Notre Dame’s Kellogg Institute for International Studies, proposed ways both governments and church communities could be more effective, including military intervention and by embracing the ‘genocide’ terminology.

Ideas emerged also for what Christians and their churches in the religiously free part of the world can do, he added. There could be a far more concerted and organized effort to promote prayer for the persecuted Church. People and parishes might also develop a relationship with persecuted Christians in a given locale. This should be guided by the wisdom and prudence of churches and organizations that have a long-standing relationship with these areas; but done right, such relationships can be great sources of spiritual encouragement and material assistance.

Such efforts are not only relatively simple to accomplish, but could be done on a large scale. In order for them to succeed, however, much depends upon the will and commitment of the Church hierarchy, individual pastors and Catholics.

With many men and women dying for their faith in the Third World, it may be tempting to overlook persecution of Christians in the Western world. But to do so would be detrimental to the religious liberty of many Catholics and other Christians.

In the United States, Christian persecution is taking on modern forms. Dozens of Catholic and Christian organizations are involved in lawsuits against the U.S. government over a Health and Human Services rule that mandates all organizations offer access to free birth control, sterilization and abortifacients for employees. The case will be argued before the nation’s highest court in the spring of 2016, with a ruling expected in June. Should the Church lose the case, they will be faced with a most difficult decision: to pay for healthcare that is morally abhorrent, or to pay crippling fines to the government — the result of which, for many, will mean certain destruction.

The examples above only begin to scratch the surface when it comes to the level of persecution Christians are facing in the modern world. The consequences of such continued persecution worldwide are dire, with both religious and secular news sources asking if Christianity in the Middle East will survive at all. In the United States, too, freedom of religion is a basic foundation and right for its people.

That the Church’s voice has not been listened to is a significant challenge for church communicators going forward. In the United States, the clash between secular ideologies and Catholic values has meant that the Church’s voice is often not given much credence when its values are viewed skeptically. Worldwide efforts to highlight
anti-Christian persecution have often run into geo-political realities, particularly in countries that have historically bad records in terms of defending minority rights.

Should the Church, the international community and people of goodwill not find a way to band together to speak out as one to challenge persecution of Christians worldwide now, matters assuredly will only get worse.

The cultural sea change of gay marriage

While the cultural sea change regarding homosexuality in general and gay marriage in particular has been years in the making, 2015 witnessed a dramatic tipping point in the western world. The Supreme Court decision in the United States and a referendum in Ireland legalizing gay marriage transformed two countries generally thought of as morally conservative and traditional. The result of these landmark events will be likely to increase the momentum of this cultural shift, but it is also likely to highlight conflicts with more traditional cultures, particularly in the southern hemisphere, and institutions like the Catholic Church.

In Ireland, citizens in that traditionally Catholic country voted 62–38% to legalize gay marriage in a May 22 2015, referendum. Voting in the Dublin area averaged more than 70 % in favor of the referendum.

This vote came despite the Catholic Church’s traditional opposition to gay marriage. But after more than a decade of scandals related to clergy sexual abuse and a growing opposition in many sectors of society to the Church’s power and influence, even supporters of the No vote saw theirs as an uphill battle.

After the vote, Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin told The New York Times that the Church had much to learn from the defeat.

The church needs to take a reality check, Martin said. It’s very clear there’s a growing gap between Irish young people and the church, and there’s a growing gap between the culture of Ireland that’s developing and the church.

Indeed, the fact that the Irish youth vote was so strongly pro-gay marriage has raised questions about the challenge facing the Irish Church in other struggles such as over abortion.

In the United States, the parallels between abortion and gay marriage – while perhaps exaggerated, hold true in that in both controversial areas the Supreme Court played a decisive role. Indeed, 31 states had constitutional amendments banning same-sex unions. In 2013, however, the Supreme Court upheld an appeals court decision striking down Proposition 8, a California law passed by the voters that outlawed same sex marriage. The high court’s decision in that case suggested that it was willing to consider deeming unconstitutional other state laws and constitutional amendments banning same sex unions. Federal courts began declaring unconstitutional state laws banning gay marriage. In 26 states, bans on gay unions were overthrown by the courts following the 2013 high court ruling.

This set the stage for the 2015 ruling in Obergfell v. Hodges. With a 5–4 vote on June 26 2015, the Supreme Court declared any ban of same sex marriage as unconstitutional. In the majority decision, written by Justice Anthony Kennedy, the court said
that such bans violated the 14th amendment of the U.S. Constitution guaranteeing due process and equal protection.

But Kennedy’s decision made it clear that the Court’s majority saw the issue as more than just a narrow legal issue. ‘In forming a marital union, two people become something greater than once they were,’ Kennedy wrote. ‘As some of the petitioners in these cases demonstrate, marriage embodies a love that may endure even past death. It would misunderstand these men and women to say they disrespect the idea of marriage. Their plea is that they do respect it, respect it so deeply that they seek to find its fulfillment for themselves. Their hope is not to be condemned to live in loneliness, excluded from one of civilization’s oldest institutions. They ask for equal dignity in the eyes of the law. The Constitution grants them that right.’

The justices in opposition to the decision strongly criticized the decision. Chief Justice John Roberts complained that five judges had taken the matter away from the people and their representatives: ‘Many people will rejoice at this decision, and I begrudge none their celebration. But for those who believe in a government of laws, not of men, the majority’s approach is deeply disheartening. … Five lawyers have closed the debate and enacted their own vision of marriage as a matter of constitutional law. Stealing this issue from the people will for many cast a cloud over same-sex marriage, making a dramatic social change that much more difficult to accept.’

Justice Antonin Scalia was more scathing: ‘The Supreme Court of the United States has descended from the disciplined legal reasoning of John Marshall and Joseph Story to the mystical aphorisms of the fortune cookie.’

The U.S. bishops, reacting to the decision, expressed their disappointment. The president of the U.S. Bishops’ conference, Archbishop Joseph E. Kurtz of Louisville, released a statement which said in part: ‘Regardless of what a narrow majority of the Supreme Court may declare at this moment in history, the nature of the human person and marriage remains unchanged and unchangeable. Just as Roe v. Wade did not settle the question of abortion over forty years ago, Obergefell v. Hodges does not settle the question of marriage today. Neither decision is rooted in the truth, and as a result, both will eventually fail. Today the Court is wrong again. It is profoundly immoral and unjust for the government to declare that two people of the same sex can constitute a marriage.’

Reaction from other Catholic sources ran the gamut. For the Jesuit-owned America magazine, which questioned ‘whether we want major public policy questions like the definition of civil marriage settled by judicial fiat.’ But the magazine also noted that surveys showed a majority of Americans, and a majority of Catholics, in support of gay marriage.

America’s editors however, saw both the Ireland vote and the Supreme Court decision as ‘part of a larger phenomenon—the transition of Western Europe and the United States to a thoroughly secular, postmodern social politics.’ In their view, ‘it is increasingly clear that those who believe that the civil law ought to reflect and codify traditional Judeo-Christian values have lost not just these most recent battles but the war itself.’

America urged greater sensitivity to the plight of homosexuals, and warned the Church to refrain from the culture war paradigm: ‘While the culture wars may be over, the new evangelization continues,’ it concluded.
But noted family law scholar Helen Alvare, writing in OSV Newsweekly, took a decidedly more pessimistic stance: ‘Today’s opinion in Obergefell v. Hodges, which invents a constitutional right to same-sex marriage applicable to the 50 states, is a story of judicial pride, successful marketing by same-sex marriage groups, and the triumph of modern therapeutic individualism. It is not a legal story. It has ‘nothing to do with’ the Constitution, as Chief Justice Roberts so accurately states in his dissent.’

Yet Alvare shared America’s conclusion that the Church must continue to engage society: ‘The future is quite uncertain on the matters of marriage and religious freedom. Christians — fresh from Pope Francis’ recent call in Laudato Si’ to affirm the intrinsic harmony of the marital alliance between the man and the woman created by God — have a great deal to offer the world. Today’s opinion does not alter our responsibility. It rather increases it.’

In the months after the Supreme Court’s decision, the legal battle turned to implementation of gay marriage and a battle between those who wanted to protect the rights of those morally opposed to gay marriage and those who wanted to extend protection for gay rights into other areas.

Most notorious was the case of Kim Davis, a Kentucky county clerk who went to jail for refusing to sign same sex marriage licenses. She was released after five days and a compromise that kept her name off the licenses. Davis later had a brief private meeting with Pope Francis during his September visit to the United States. In December, Kentucky’s governor issued an executive order removing the names of county clerks from marriage licenses.

While homosexual rights advocates say they will continue to press for further protections in the workplace and elsewhere, defenders of traditional marriage worry that those who object to gay marriage will be impacted by costly legal challenges and more restrictions. What is certain is that the courts will continue to be confronted with these issues for years to come.

Equally certain is that addressing gay marriage and the religious freedom issues that have become part and parcel of the debate will be one of the significant challenges facing the Church – both in terms of communicating the Church’s position to its own members and in terms of addressing the legal and cultural challenges presented by the larger society.

**Controversies and scandals beset the Vatican again**

The pontificate of Pope Benedict XVI ended in early 2013 with leaked documents and a book reporting on them, rumors of sexual scandal and a secret dossier by three cardinals investigating what came to be known as ‘Vatileaks’ that was given to the Pope two months before he retired. The pontificate of Pope Francis began with Benedict passing on to him the 300-page dossier.

In 2015, leaks, controversy and scandal again hit the Vatican, embroiling it in a series of controversies that observers labeled Vatileaks II.

The first leak was the advance publication of a draft of the papal encyclical *Laudato Si’* by noted Vaticanist Sandro Magister and his publication l’Espresso. The text, later judged to have been a late draft of the first encyclical by Francis, was widely circulated four days before the official document was released June 18. In July Magister was
rebuked by a Vatican spokesman and his credentials suspended by the Vatican’s press office as a result of the leak. The revocation of his credentials was lifted in a December 9 letter from Fr. Federico Lombardi, S.J., head of the Vatican press office. It was never publicly announced who had leaked the draft to Magister.

Because of the controversy surrounding the 2014 Extraordinary Synod on the Family, tensions were high on the eve of October’s Ordinary Synod of the Family because of an increasingly tense debate about what might be discussed or recommended at the Synod, particularly in the areas concerning divorce and remarriage and Church teachings on sexuality. Against this backdrop, a Polish priest who worked in the Vatican’s Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith held a press conference Oct. 3 announcing that he was gay and had a partner. Father Krzysztof Charamsa called on the Church to change its teachings regarding homosexuality. He was subsequently fired from his CDF post and suspended from priestly ministry.

Barely had that controversy run its course before Sandro Magister was again in the news, reporting Oct. 12 about an Oct. 5 letter to Pope Francis purported to have been signed by 13 cardinals. The letter raised concerns about the synodal process and perceptions on the part of some that the process had been skewed to influence a predetermined outcome, particularly on the neuralgic issue of Communion for the divorced and remarried.

Pope Francis, Magister reported, responded to the letter in a speech to the synod fathers October 6, his comments summarized by Fr. Lombardi as benignly affirming the synod’s course. In a subsequent tweet from Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J., editor of La Civilta’ Cattolica and a participant in the synod hall, the Jesuit reported that the Pope had also issued a subtle rebuke of the letter writers, telling the synod ‘not to give in to the conspiracy hermeneutic, which is sociologically weak and spiritually unhelpful.’

These reports were subsequently confirmed by other journalists. A spokesman for Cardinal George Pell, one of the signers of the letter, said the text and signatories published by Magister were not completely accurate and stressed that it was a private letter to the Pope.

In a subsequent radio interview, one of the signatories – Cardinal Timothy Dolan – explained the genesis of the letter and his reaction to the Pope’s Oct. 6 response.

The incident became another embarrassment for the controversial synod. It also shaped the news coverage that followed. The media focused on the progressive/conservative divide, and reporting throughout the synod focused on who was winning and who was losing on the various topics raised in the synod hall and included in the final document.

What has never been publicly announced is who leaked the letter of the 13 cardinals and what that person’s intent was – to embarrass the cardinal signatories, the synod organizers, or Pope Francis himself.

Just as the synod was concluding, the Vatican was rocked by another ‘Vatileaks’ expose. Two Italian journalists – Gianluigi Nuzzi and Emiliano Fittipaldi – released books simultaneously based on additional leaked documents concerning Vatican finances.

Nuzzi, who wrote Merchants in the Temple (Macmillan, 2015), was the author of the 2012 Vatileaks expose “His Holiness” that preceded Pope Benedict’s resignation. Fittipaldi, who writes for the same magazine that publishes Sandro Magister, published
Avarice: Documents Revealing Wealth, Scandals and Secrets of Francis’ Church (Avarizia: Le carte che svelano ricchezza, scandali e segreti della chiesa di Francesco, Feltrinelli, 2015). Both books were published Nov. 5, 2015.

Nuzzi’s book, which was published in the United States, made several claims based on the documents that had been leaked to him, which included financial reports and even transcripts of private talks given by Pope Francis.

Nuzzi said that the documents showed:

- Widespread waste and corruption
- Undervaluation of the worth of Vatican real estate holdings
- Sweetheart deals for Vatican officials renting apartments owned by the Vatican
- Exorbitant fees charged by postulators for pursuing sainthood causes
- A lack of financial transparency

On Nov. 2 Msgr. Lucio Angel Vallejo Balda, a Spanish diocesan priest and a member of the Priestly Society of the Holy Cross, an association of priests intrinsically united to the Prelature of Opus Dei, was arrested by the Vatican. Msgr. Vallejo had served on COSEA (the Pontifical Commission for Reference on the Organization of the Economic-Administrative Structure of the Holy See), which was created by Pope Francis shortly after his election and charged with looking into the financial management of the Vatican. Also charged was Francesca Chaouqui, often described as a glamorous PR specialist who also served on COSEA.

The Vatican announced that it was indicting those arrested on Nov. 23. The trial of both defendants, and a third person, an aide to Msgr. Vallejo – Nicola Maio, an Italian layman – began in late November but has been delayed to accommodate requests by the defense. Also charged are the two Italian journalists – Nuzzi and Fittipaldi – who were accused of pressuring the other defendants into releasing the documents.

Speculation on why the leaks happened, if indeed any of the accused are responsible for the leaks, has focused primarily on an alleged disappointment on the part of the defendants that their original service on COSEA had not led to further appointments.

While the trial had not concluded by the end of 2015, observers are noting that the difference between the 2012 and the 2015 leaks are significant. For one thing, the information released in 2015 was already known by the Pope, who had requested the reports. Indeed, the leaked documents make the Pope seem proactive and in charge, even if the challenges are significant. Likewise, the reports of mismanagement and abuses suggest that a Vatican outsider like Cardinal Pell, who now serves as head of the Secretariat for the Economy, is what would be needed for the job of reforming the Vatican’s financial management.

If anything, the leaked documents bolster Francis’s case for transparency and reform. Perhaps the greatest misstep on the part of authorities has been to charge the two Italian journalists. This is a battle that the Vatican cannot win, since they are Italian citizens, and the overreach has earned the ire of some in the news media. It is also a distraction from what remains the most significant challenge: Assuring the improvement of the Vatican’s financial management and at the same time controlling unauthorized leaks that – as seen in many of the controversies besetting the Vatican in
2015 – become weapons to weaken, distract or put on the defensive those who are the targets of the leaks.

**The next wave: physician-assisted suicide**

In 2015, it became clear that the Catholic Church’s teachings on human dignity and the right to life were being challenged not just in the area of prenatal life, but in the end-of-life arena.

In the United States, the surprising summertime move by California to approve physician-assisted suicide caught many by surprise. What began as a special legislative session to address ways to finance health care for the poor suddenly became an opportunity to pass a physician-assisted suicide bill in the country’s most populous state.

Despite a public appeal by Los Angeles Archbishop Jose Gomez, Gov. Jerry Brown – a former Jesuit seminarian who has twice served as California governor – signed the bill into law, citing his own feelings about maintaining such an option in one’s life. ‘In the end, I was left to reflect on what I would want in the face of my own death,’ the governor said in his statement. ‘I do not know what I would do if I were dying in prolonged and excruciating pain. I am certain, however, that it would be a comfort to be able to consider the options afforded by this bill. And I wouldn’t deny that right to others.’

This is the wrong decision for California, Archbishop Gomez said of the signing of the bill. How wrong this decision is will be measured in the lives that will be lost in the years to come — the lives of poor people, the elderly, the disabled and those who are dependent on public assistance.

Much of the renewed interest in ‘right to die’ legislation began in late 2014 with the well-publicized suicide of Brittany Maynard, a 29 year-old woman with inoperable brain cancer. Since her death on November 1, 2014, up to half of U.S. states are reportedly considering ‘right-to-die’ legislation, while public opinion polls say 68 percent of American now support some form of physician-assisted suicide.

Elsewhere in North America, in February 2015, the Canadian Supreme Court approved the right to physician-assisted suicide in that country. In their Feb. 6 ruling, according the Daily Mail, ‘the court explained why it was creating a new constitutional right to autonomy over one’s death in some circumstances: Those who are severely and irremediably suffering, whether physically or psychologically, ‘may be condemned to a life of severe and intolerable suffering’ by the government’s absolute ban on assisted dying. ‘A person facing this prospect has two options: she can take her own life prematurely, often by violent or dangerous means, or she can suffer until she dies from natural causes. The choice is cruel.’

In September the Canadian bishops issued a statement on the eve of national elections criticizing the court’s decision: ‘We cannot but express our outrage at the decision of the Supreme Court of Canada to create a new ‘constitutional right’ in Canada, the so-called ‘right’ to suicide. Nor can we suppress our profound dismay, disappointment and disagreement with the Court’s decision. The ruling would legalize an action that, from time immemorial, has been judged immoral: the taking of innocent life.
Moreover, it puts at risk the lives of the vulnerable, the depressed, those with physical or mental illness, and those with disabilities.

In Europe, much of the debate has centered on rapidly expanding criteria for terminating a life. In Belgium, the law has been expanded to include children and those who are depressed or suffer other non-lethal conditions. Rachel Aviv in *The New Yorker* published a widely circulated article on the rapid advance of suicide in Belgium. One out of every 20 deaths in Flanders is now due to assisted suicide, she reported.

In Great Britain, which has witnessed several emotional ‘right-to-die’ cases play out in the popular media, an effort to pass a physician-assisted suicide bill was defeated by a sizeable majority in September. One MP told the *Financial Times* it was a ‘once in a generation defeat.’

Catholic Church leaders have been outspoken in their opposition to these legislative efforts. The California Bishops staunchly resisted the legalization of physician-assisted suicide, but to no avail. Opponents in California began a petition drive to collect 365,000 signatures to force a referendum to overturn the measure.

Despite the Catholic Church’s reluctance to weigh in on referendum issues, the Church gave permission for a Knights of Columbus-funded drive to collect the signatures at Los Angeles parishes. ‘Ordinarily the Church does not take a stand on ballot initiatives of referendum until they qualify for the ballot,’ said Andrew Rivas, director of government and community relations for the Archdiocese of Los Angeles. ‘In this case, the California bishops believe the threat of physician-assisted suicide is so grave that the Church should participate in efforts to overturn the measure.’

The deadline for the signatures was January 2016. Only 200,000 signatures were collected in the drive, however, meaning that no referendum to overturn the legislation will be on the 2016 ballot.

Perhaps one of the most fiercely fought campaigns was the 2012 ballot measure in Massachusetts to legalize physician-assisted suicide. The Massachusetts bishops waged a strong grassroots effort to persuade voters to reject the initiative, which was narrowly defeated. Many observers credit a public statement by Victoria Kennedy, the widow of renown U.S. Senator Ted Kennedy, with swinging the vote against the initiative.

While Catholic leaders have not always had such success, efforts to educate Catholics as to the Church teaching regarding assisted suicide legislation have been critical to the opposition. In California, Archbishop Gomez was particularly powerful in asserting that such legislation threatens first of all the poor and those least able to pay for good medical care, and he warned that while physician-assisted suicide is sold as a right for the dying, it can quickly become an expectation driven by financial imperatives.

Archbishop Gomez believes that once physician-assisted suicide is legalized, economic arguments rather than personal preference will become a prime driver. The libertarian impulse to make one’s own decisions and to have the personal option of ending one’s life in the face of severe pain or imminent death has become a compelling argument, however, and – when combined with an emotionally charged story such as that of Brittany Maynard – highly attractive to voters and legislators.
Disclosure statement

The authors report no conflicts of interest. The authors alone are responsible for the content and writing of this article.

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