Year after year, surveys measuring the level of trust toward the main social institutions show predominantly negative data. Statistics from Ipsos (2019), Gallup (2020) and Edelman (2020) place governments, banks and multinational companies among the least trusted organizations, while the military, the scientific community and small entrepreneurs maintain their credibility.

On the rare occasions when surveys take religious organizations into consideration, they accompany other institutions on the downward trend. For example, the study published by Edelman states that only 46% of the global population trusts religious leaders (Edelman 2020). Only politicians – at 42% – scored less well, while businesspeople and even journalists – both at 51% – enjoyed greater support. In addition, research by the Pew Research Center (2018) asked those Europeans who were raised as Christians or in another faith, but had lost it, why they no longer believed. The fourth most cited reason was ‘scandals involving religious institutions and leaders’ (53%).

On the other hand, figures published by the Catholic Church in 2019 show that globally it continues to grow in numbers, with more than 1.3 billion members (Annuarium Statisticum Ecclesiae 2020). Despite these overall growing numbers, in Europe, Pew Research (2018) indicates that those who claim to be regular church attendees amount to just 18% of the population. Even so, a further 46% claim to be Christians even though they are non-practicing, that is, they attend church just a few times a year. However, their faith is much more than just nominal. Europe remains predominantly Christian. As this editorial is being written in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic, there is evidence (Sherwod and Levene 2020) that during this time of uncertainty, people have been looking to fill a spiritual void.

Parallel to this paradox of apparent lack of trust, but a clinging to or positive desire for faith or at least spirituality, there are other forces at work that provide additional nuance. Klaus Schwab, of the World Economic Forum, was articulating these as long ago as 2010 (Schwab 2010), when reflecting on the world’s first truly global crisis: the financial crash of 2008. They are still pertinent in 2020 as we face the first truly global health pandemic. Schwab argued that in the face of globalization, growing interdependence, increased complexity and the shifts in power from the North and West to the South and East, ‘people’ were feeling powerless to control their lives. Neither were there organizational or national systems of values or processes that could provide the answers. As a consequence, those with simple answers encapsulated in ideologies such as nationalism, fundamentalism, populism or indeed other forms of activism, could find resonance.

Faced with these contradictions – lack of trust, but a desire for trust; falling church attendance, but a desire for belief; increased complexity, but a search for simplicity – we cannot look away. We wanted to ask ourselves hard questions about the extent to which there is a crisis of confidence and what role communication plays in it.
What is ‘trust’?

In English, the word ‘trust’ comes from *traust* (Proto-Germanic), a variation of *deru* (Proto Indo-European Language): to be firm, solid. Trust and faith are often linked. Indeed, the Cambridge University Dictionary (2020) definition of faith is ‘great trust or confidence in someone’. The Latin term for faith (*fides*) is inspired by the Greek term *pistis* (faith), which in turn goes back to the Sanskrit term *fid*, meaning ‘to bind’. Indeed, trust binds or makes firm our uncertain will to a certainty that we do not yet possess. It is a leap in the dark, the hope that someone’s future behavior will be consistent with the expectations generated, even if we do not have absolute certainty (Hawley 2019). Trusting therefore implies freely accepting a risk that makes us vulnerable. That is why expressions such as ‘building trust’ are wrong, because they imply a certain control over an attribute that can only be granted in freedom, without automatisms or magic formulas. In fact, trust is not built, it is given. The best that can be done is that institutions and leaders attempt to create the conditions where trust might be generated, but they can never control all the variables that constitute those conditions because in essence they are dealing with matters of free will.

If trust implies risk, uncertainty and vulnerability, it is easily understandable that in the current context it is a wounded and fragile value. Gambetta points out that trust has two main enemies: bad character and poor information (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001). In the context of large organizations, reputation has been questioned as a result of a series of large-scale scandals (Panama Papers, Cambridge Analytica, Volkswagen emissions, Petrobas or sexual abuses in the Catholic Church), generating growing social unrest toward leadership cadres. It is as if we have suddenly realized that institutions serve ‘the system’ and not society. The values that guide them are not aligned with those of their publics, who in turn have developed an enormous sensitivity to ‘hidden agendas’. In fact, institutions are experiencing that lying has a price: uncertainty and distrust of the experts, of the elites elevated by historical criteria or of those hierarchical authorities who have not known how to demonstrate by deeds that ‘power is service’, to use an expression of Pope Francis (2013).

In light of this, it is not surprising that some organizations have recognized that to gain trust they have to regain the sense of service to society, not just to a financial system. A seminal moment was the letter that Larry Fink, the CEO of Blackrock, the world’s largest hedge fund, wrote to other CEOs in 2018 (Fink 2018). In it he said, ‘to prosper over time, every company must not only deliver financial performance, but show how it makes a positive contribution to society’. Purpose has become central to how organizations articulate what they stand for and how they live. It helps them to justify their place in the world and is a cornerstone of their claims to legitimacy.

In his letter to CEOs in 2019, Fink (2019) went further: ‘Purpose is not a mere tagline or marketing campaign; it is a company’s fundamental reason for being – what it does every day to create value for its stakeholders’. The difference between how purpose is articulated and lived specifies the authenticity gap and the point at which trust can be lost. Purpose has become central to what has become known as corporate character, that combination of purpose, values and culture that define an organization’s DNA.

The other element that undermines trust is deficient or defective information. Digital technologies have led to polarization of opinions, the creation of ideological bubbles, information overload and fake news. Such a landscape has undoubtedly contributed to increasing fear, indignation and populism, which are breeding grounds for mistrust (Nichols 2017). At the same time, the discrediting of social truths held by some institutions has contributed to the volatility of values. Curiously, in an historical era that has elevated reason, renouncing faith as a possible path to knowledge, public opinion finds neither time nor desire to think and debate. As discussed in the 2019 Special Issue on post-truth in *Church,*
Communication and Culture, the renunciation of truth generates apathy toward reality. Seeking truth together with dialogue and respect has become nothing more than a utopian ideal, and hence, the bonds that hold the social fabric together have been weakened. The post-truth era has been followed, logically and understandably, by the post-trust era. We need to strengthen trust in order to seek truth together and ensure coexistence. The situation was described by Aquinas eight centuries ago: ‘Men could not live together if they did not have mutual trust, that is, if the truth did not manifest itself’ (Aquinas n.d.; Summa q. 109. A3).

We could conclude that if bad character and poor information (Bacharach and Gambetta 2001) threaten trust, their antithesis must build it. In their major report – The CCO as Pacesetter – the Page Society, an international organization whose members comprise Board level professional communicators, defines the two fundamental responsibilities for senior communication professionals as being ‘helping the enterprise define and activate its corporate character and building authentic engagement with stakeholders’ (Arthur W. Page Society 2019). By implication they make the link between communication and its role in making organizations trustworthy.

The question of trust in institutions – particularly in the Catholic Church – and its relationship with communication deserves in-depth study from various approaches and applied to various sectors. Such a central argument requires a multidisciplinary approach, although we will be far from exhausting all the possibilities.

Contents of the special issue

Speaking of trust in the Catholic Church necessarily leads to talking about the management of the crisis of clerical sexual abuse by its leaders. The focus is on managing responsibility and information, with case studies by Paulina Guzik and Patrick O’Brien. The first deals with the case of Poland, emphasizing the need for accountability and suggesting five actions to regain trust. O’Brien offers a map of the management of abuses in the 197 dioceses of the United States, and points to transparency in communication and government as a key to regaining trust.

As you will read in these pages, neither the communicator nor the communication serves to mask a negative reality. The institution must justify its existence only if it is a good for society, even if it makes mistakes. This question is approached from a theological point of view: Is it still possible to trust the Church? To answer this question, Marco Vanzini highlights the tensions that characterize and define the identity of the Church: such as her divine origin and her human composition, or the inner coexistence of holiness and sin, among others. On the other hand, Gabriel Magalhães, taking a cue from passages of sacred and universal literature, invites reflection on the contrast between human and divine justice, highlighting the excessive and almost ‘scandalous’ nature of divine mercy. Faced with the reality of a certain human solidarity in evil, he explores the need for collective guilt and forgiveness as a common horizon that allows trust to be recovered at the social level.

It is precisely ‘the Church communicator’ on whom the article by Professors Gil and Gili puts the focus. His role as spokesman for an institution and bearer of a message gives him great responsibility. The credibility that he demands and needs, the authors maintain, depends to a great extent on his human and professional virtues. Creative fidelity, reliable transmission of an ideal and embodiment of the values he communicates are expected from him.

Internal communication in organizations, with the transformation of the channels through which trust travels – more horizontal and collaborative than vertical and
hierarchical (Botsman 2017) – represents a challenge for those who govern the organization. Receiving trust from the leadership in turn generates confidence in the workers. To put these ‘spirals of trust’ into action, Gara and La Porte analyze one of the most important moments in the relationship between an employee and an organization: recruitment. Trust, they say, must be considered one of the great strategic tools of the Human Resources department.

In the legal field, Moreno and Díaz show with a case study the ‘legal defense of corporate reputation’, where law and communication work in a complementary way. In recent years, especially with the digital revolution, new fields of interaction have opened up with their own followers, as well as new spaces for vulnerability (e.g. privacy, personal data, copyright …). In this context of the Internet, the authors present the crisis of reputation of an NGO linked to the Church and show how law and communication are two strategic tools of the organizations destined to collaborate.

Looking at trust management in the public sector is a necessary source of inspiration for an institution like the Church. Maríá José Canel conducts the academic interview with Steven Van de Walle on trust in public administration. He deals with a wide range of topics: from the ways of measuring trust and its typologies, to the influence of emotions on the inspiration of trust. The interview offers some comparative considerations between some other institutions, such as NGOs, and the Church. It also includes a final reflection on the new scenario created by COVID-19, which is testing citizens’ trust in the state and the health system.

In the public sphere, the management of vulnerability takes on a particular nuance in the case of high reliability organizations, entities that by their nature must avoid errors at all costs (Lekka 2011). Sanders takes the criteria of the HROs as her model to measure the trust that the British government has earned (or lost) with its public communication during the pandemic generated by the COVID-19, a situation that has tested the strength of social relations – especially trust toward public services – and that will merit another special issue of this journal.

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Juan Narbona
School of Church Communications, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, Italy
✉️ j.narbona@pusc.it

Jordi Pujol
School of Church Communications, Pontifical University of the Holy Cross, Rome, Italy
✉️ j.pujol@pusc.it

Anne Gregory
Huddersfield Business School, University of Huddersfield, Huddersfield, UK
✉️ a.gregory@hud.ac.uk

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