



Covering Hot Button Issues as a Catholic

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Covering Hot-Button Issues

- Hot button issues refer to those often controversial subjects that are important, even neuralgic, about which people have strong opinions.
- In today's increasingly polarized context and culture wars, more issues are becoming "hot-button," because even if they're not particularly controversial themselves, they "symbolize" something that is polarized.
- Covering hot-button issues is a challenge because people are often not evaluating facts but assessing what side we're on.
- Some try to duck controversial issues. Others emphasize them to the point of obsession. It's important to cover them in the appropriate measure and in the right way.



Principles for Covering Hot-Button Issues

- Catholic journalists are not apologists, but truth seekers and truth tellers. Sometimes this involves explaining what Catholics believe to a wider world in a way that might seem to overlap with apologetics. But sometimes it's the opposite of "defending the Church," especially when covering corruption incompatible with the holiness of the Church.
- Coverage, therefore, should be a search to find out and share the truth, *dia-logos*. Sometimes this involves leading people on that dialogue by presenting the subject for different angles, but Catholic coverage can't be "bi-polar," just presenting the opinions of both sides as if the truth doesn't matter.
- The subject should be newsworthy rather than simply neuralgic



Principles for Covering Hot-Button Issues

- It should seek to impart fundamentally *light* not *heat*.
- Coverage should seek to present facts, generally without endorsing or condemning, or being manipulated to give free advertising.
- It should be particularly good in explaining the Church's understanding in an age in which many only receive a caricature through popular culture or secular media.
- Coverage should seek to present the aspects of the good, the positive motivation and true ideas, driving them, even if the arguments are respectfully rebutted.



Principles for Covering Hot-Button Issues

- It should be respectful of the persons involved, presenting controversial issues fairly, even when one strongly disagrees, conscious of the impact it can have on them. It should show compassion to those who are suffering, even if self-inflicted.
- Coverage cannot prescind from faith, but we can look at the subject from various angles, including the perspective of those with weak or no faith.
- When possible, it's good to try to describe what the Church is *for*, in order to contextualize what it opposes.



Principles for Covering Hot-Button Issues

- Considering the emotivism of the age, it is generally helpful to illustrate points by describing stories that can help people identify with the persons and truths involved. Many today believe first by their “eyes” before their “ears.” They’re more practical than theoretical.
- Because of the sensitive nature of hot-button issues, journalists should do extra homework to be able to ask better questions and understand more deeply the nuances of answers. Otherwise, inaccuracies may abound and produce heat rather than light.



Categories of Hot-Button Issues

- There are many issues that are controversial “*ad intra*,” others “*ad extra*,” and others both inside and outside the Church.
- It is helpful to grasp them this way because it often will influence the way issues are covered, understood and explained.
 - For example, sometimes non-Catholics will have no idea why an “*ad intra*” issue is so controversial for Catholics.
 - Conversely, sometimes controversies among Catholics are not really Catholic controversies but social, political, economic, psychological disagreements imported into the Church.



Structure of this conference

- What I would like to do is to discuss, first, are various hot-button issues that are controversial both inside and outside the Church.
- Then I'd like to focus on issues that are controversial *ad intra*, categorizing them according to categories of Catholic faith and life.
- For each of the issues, I'd like to present some aspects of these debates that often can get missed in coverage that solid Catholic coverage will provide.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **The nature, purpose and exercise of the papacy**

- Because of the nature of papal leadership inside and outside the Church, Popes are bound to be signs of contradiction, to say, do and decide things that are popular among some and unpopular among others.
- Certain topics about the papacy are by nature controversial, like *papal primacy* in ecumenical circles and especially *papal infallibility*, which is shocking to many non-Catholics and often still confusing to Catholics.
- All three aspects of the Pope's office — teaching, sanctifying, governing — can become neuralgic. The Pope's universal and immediate jurisdiction, the interplay between Pope, bishops, and the *sensus fidei*, can sometimes become confusing in practice.
- It's important in covering the papacy to present Church teaching clearly — what it is and what it isn't — to contextualize and clarify whatever issues arise.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **The Church and Politics**

- Many are confused about the Church's involvement as an institution in political matters, from the diplomatic work of the Holy See, to the statements by Bishops' conferences, to parish priests' preaching during election cycles.
- Much of the opposition is to the stands taken by the Church, but it is often framed as a violation of a so-called separation of Church and State. While Christians are citizens, the nature of the Church's weighing in on political matters can be a source of confusion. Movements like "integralism" make people, as well as historical circumstances, can make people more suspicious.
- The Church's political agenda can be summed up by Catholic Social Teaching. Most of the moral progress in history came through moral movements spurred by the Churches (against slavery, torture, totalitarianism, etc.)



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Life Issues** — Among the most controversial issues of all are issues of the defense and promotion of the dignity of every human life.
 - **Abortion** — defending the unborn, helping mothers choose life, not being compelled to participate in or pay for abortions.
 - **IVF and ARTs** — Often unregulated creation of life in labs, freezing or destruction of embryos, using them to harvest embryonic body-parts
 - **Euthanasia** — Voluntary and Involuntary. Assisted Suicide. Gives green light to hopelessness and despair. Many are not terminally ill or old, but don't want to burden others. Can become a duty to die. There is a need for better palliative care and hospice.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Life Issues**

- **Death Penalty** — Church has increasingly said that, while historically used and theologically possible in extreme circumstances, the need for it is “practically non-existent” and therefore “inadmissible.”
- **Just War** — Many try to argue that there should just be “just peace.” Others, including many in the international community, now focus the “Responsibility to Protect.”
- **An increasingly homicidal culture** — In some societies (like the USA), gun violence is out of control with *mass murders* occurring regularly. While people always pull the trigger, many are divided as to whether we should equip those with homicidal thoughts easily to murder scores of innocents.
- The Church is for the dignity of every person to be respected and defended as images of Christ himself and against anything that discards human life.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Issues of Sexual Morality**

- **Marriage** — The meaning of marriage as the lasting union of one man and one woman open to children is challenged by a wide-spread culture of cohabitation, no-fault divorce, the redefinition of marriage to embrace same-sex unions, lack of commitment.
- **Chastity** — Chaste continence outside of marriage is often ridiculed or deemed impossible. The sexual revolution has sought not only to remove any shame from a culture of pornography, masturbation and premarital sex, but portrays them as normal and beneficial practices.
- **Pornography** — This is not just an issue of fomenting lust and the sexual objectification of others but of a debilitating addiction with many consequences.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Issues of Sexual Morality**

- **Contraception** — The Catholic Church’s opposition to contraception within marriage as corrosive of the one-flesh union and openness to life, as well as prudentially to the promotion of contraception outside of marriage, is perhaps its most well-known objection to the ethos of the sexual revolution.
- **Same-sex attractions and activity** — The Church’s distinction between same-sex attractions and same-sex sexual activity is lost to most, as is the distinction between the Church’s opposition to violence against those with SSA and not permitting “violence” to extend to a failure to support all rights claims of the LGBT movement, including same-sex “marriage.”
- It’s good to present clearly what the Church promotes — the connection between love, marriage, sex and life — in order to clarify the difference between loving and using others. It’s also helpful to clarify that culture cannot be neutral to these developments.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Issues of Human Anthropology**

- **Gender ideology** — Once the meaning of sex as a verb was redefined, there has been an attempt to redefine sex as a noun, because the two are intrinsically connected. Gender ideology attempts to redefine who the human person is and the relationship between body and soul. It also is a direct deconstructive assault on the truth about the human person not to mention promotes an ideological attack on the vulnerable.
- **Those who self-identify as trans** — Pope Francis has called us to accompany those who are sincerely confused about who they are, but this pastoral support does not involve affirming gender ideology not to mention puberty blockers, cross-sex hormones, mutilating surgeries and sterility.
- The Church must lead with love, but real love is united to the truth.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Clergy Sexual Abuse Scandal**

- The scale of this crisis (the number and nature of incidents, the way it was handled by Church leaders, the lack of horror on the part of many in the Church) has made the Church seem to many like a corrupt and perverted crime syndicate, not to mention hypocritical. It's used as a validation of almost any and all opposition to the Church and, in litigious societies, is reducing many Church institutions to bankruptcy.
- The media, particularly secular media, have forced Church leaders who were reluctant to face the crisis to have to do so.
- Catholic media must show similar zeal to root out this evil while at the same time giving facts by which the crisis can be understood, like when the abuse occurred, what the Church has done to reform, incidence rates of other religious and public institutions, analyze fairly the causes, and, without ignoring or downplaying the issue, showing those areas of the Church where she is consistent with her mission.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Immigration** — The Church’s promotion of care for refugees and migrants as we would receive Christ touches on many different political questions with regard to national security, national identity, education, health care, social services and more. Important to insist on the fundamentals of an ethical framework lest immigrants be dehumanized (“aliens”) and suffer unnecessarily, while acknowledging the many legitimate public goods involved in the question.
- **Religious Freedom** — Freedom of Religious Belief, Freedom of Religion and Freedom of Conscience are at issue regularly in various confessional States as well as in secular societies when faithful oppose practices that the majority religion or governments, or culture are demanding.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Development** — The Church's support and work for integral human development (human, economic, environmental, social, cultural) often solicits criticism from the right for a lack of subsidiarity as well as unintentional support for a leftist agenda and from the left for opposing aspects of population control, on the poor rather than on poverty elimination or on excessive care for the planet at the expense of human beings.
- **Education** — The Church's insistence on parents as the first (not only) teachers of their children and what that means in terms of the opportunity for Catholic education and home schooling is controversial with secularists and staunch supports of government schools. The Church stands in opposition to certain movements have been successful in manipulating curricula for indoctrination.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Environmentalism** — The Church's support for integral ecology is controversial to those both on the right who are suspicious of the way the green movement is used to advance population control and various leftist economic goals as well as to those on the left who do not appreciate the focus on human ecology and the care for our most endangered roommates in our common home.
- **Women's Equality** — The Church's all-male clergy can scandalize both those who are fighting for the advancement of women as well as those who want to downplay sexual difference as well as revelation. Without touching on the Sacrament of Holy Orders, there is much room for progress; what becomes contentious is whether such steps are part of a larger push to change what cannot be changed.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra* and *Ad Extra*

- **Criminal Justice** — The Church's ethical interventions in questions of criminal justice is often controversial, particularly with regard to the death penalty, papal pronouncements against life imprisonment, corrupt judiciaries or police departments, and more.
- **Church and Science** — both historical (Galileo) and actual, when the Church is proposed as anti-science. The Church very much supports science, but insists that science be ethical.
- **Miracles** — In a secular age living as if God doesn't exist, the Church's support for miracles and confirmation of their role in the causes of saints, Marian apparitions, and Eucharistic piety has made them hot-button issues. Catholic media can present the facts and lead people on the journey many non-Catholics doctors reviewing the facts have made.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Mass**

- The role of the Holy See (Dicastery for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments) vis-à-vis bishops on liturgical direction.
- Syro-Malabar controversy in Kerala over liturgical orientation, particularly in the Archeparchy of Ernakulam-Angamaly.
- *Traditionis Custodes* and the traditional Latin Mass
- Communion for the divorced-and-remarried, for abortion supporters and others who are “obstinately persistent in manifest grave sin”
- Even Eucharistic Revival initiatives, like in the USA, can become controversial.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Holy Orders**

- **Governance** — Whether ecclesiastical authority comes from sacred ordination or from canonical mission. *Praedicate Evangelium* said, “any member of the faithful can preside over a Dicastery or Office.” *Lumen Gentium* and the *Code of Canon Law* describe that the power of governance flows from sacred ordination.
- **Priestly Ordination of Married Men** — Some push for it vigorously (like at the Synod on the Amazon); others resist for theological and prudential reasons.
- **Ordination of Women** — Some are advocating for women to be ordained deacons; others assert it’s a theological impossibility.
- **“Laicization” of priests** — The clergy sexual abuse crisis has brought to the forefront the question of what dismissal from the clerical state means theologically and pastorally and what the Church’s duties are.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Confession**

- Some claim it's an optional sacrament; others teach it's necessary for salvation not to mention for worthy reception of Holy Communion.
- In some places, there is a push for general absolution contrary to Church law and sacramental practice.
- Some Catholics echo Protestants saying that we should confess our sins directly to God.
- Some fight over whether to confess in a confessional or a reconciliation room, face-to-face or behind a screen.
- There's also some fight about whether to call it Confession, Penance, or Reconciliation.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Baptism**

- Some in the Church are impacted by Protestant arguments about whether baptism is necessary for salvation and what this means not only for the baptism of children “as soon as possible” not to mention the Church’s great commission.
- Some for ideological reasons have argued about the proper sacramental formula:
 - “In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” or “In the name of the Creator, the Redeemer and the Sanctifier”?
 - “I baptize you” or “We baptize you.”



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Matrimony**

- We have already discussed above the dimensions of marriage that are also *ad extra* concerns with regard to the meaning of marriage, the conceptual attack against it, its importance and purpose, etc.
- There are also some *ad intra* controversies.
 - Divorce itself and divorce-and-remarriage
 - Declarations of nullity: their purpose, process, costs, whether their just “Catholic divorce,” what about children.
 - Pastoral practice with regard to cohabitation
 - Requests from seniors for sacramental marriages but not civil, lest they lose benefits.
 - The promotion of training in fertility awareness (NFP) for use conceiving children as well as, for serious reasons, avoiding fertile periods.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Anointing of the Sick**

- **For whom and when?** — There is widespread confusion not just among laity but also some clergy about who is eligible for the Sacrament and when it should be given. The Church teaches it is for those who are “in danger of death due to illness or old age” and can be given as soon as the condition emerges, not held until when one is about to breath his or her last.
- **By whom?** — In canon law and sacramental theology, because of its connection to the forgiveness of sins, it can be given exclusively by a priest, but some push for deacons, religious women and pastoral care people in hospitals and nursing homes and during the pandemic, even for nurses.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Sacramental and Liturgical Matters

- **Confirmation**

- **When?** — In Eastern Churches, Confirmation is given at baptism. In the West, it was delayed until the bishop himself could do it. Now, however, in many places, it is treated like a Catholic *bar* or *bat mitzvah*, as a rite of passage toward spiritual adulthood, etc. There are many who push for it to be given much earlier, with the majority arguing prior to receiving Holy Communion.
- **By whom?** — Since the original separation of Confirmation from Baptism was so that the bishop himself could confirm every baptized member of his Diocese, some question the practice of various bishops to delegate the faculties to celebrate the Sacrament of Confirmation to priests.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Other Matters

- **Vatican II** — There is a debate about the meaning of the Second Vatican Council, about whether it was reform in continuity or rupture, what it intended with regard to liturgical reforms, and particularly its Decree on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*), which is opposed by the Society of St. Pius X and some supporters of the traditional Latin Mass. Vatican II has been a hot-button issue since the time it took place and then afterward, in the convulsions that took place in society and the Church, even to the present.
- **Synodality** — Because of the “Synodal Way” in Germany, many are suspicious of synodality in general and think it is being used as a means to challenge and change Church teaching in terms of ecclesiology, the Sacrament of Holy Orders, sexual morality and more. There have been many controversies in recent Synods on the Family, Youth, and the Amazon as well as about the consultations, documents, and composition of the Synod on Synodality.



Hot Button Issues *Ad Intra*: Other Matters

- **Interreligious Dialogue** — There is some debate as to what are the aims and whether it should be geared toward theological discussion or to practical communion in charity. There is similarly a question as to whether people of different religious can pray together or pray at the same time in their own way.



Some Questions to Begin Our Discussion

- After mentioning many hot-button issues inside and outside the Church, on which one do you think the Catholic media have done a particularly effective job in bringing light to the sensitive topic? On which one do you think that the Catholic media have done a poor job either by neglect or by contributing to the confusion?
- How does living one's Catholic faith affect journalistic objectivity? Can a faithful Catholic effectively and objectively cover ecclesiastical affairs?
- What difficulties have you found in distinguishing between being an apologist and a professional journalist?





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Questions, Conversation,
and Applications
to Our Work

