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Crisis principles

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Review of the monograph: P. Guzik (2025), *Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church: Key lessons and new perspectives from a crisis communications standpoint*. Wydawnictwo Petrus

Paulina Guzik's *Child sexual abuse in the Catholic Church: Key lessons and new perspectives from a crisis communications standpoint* is an exceptionally ambitious and timely monograph that makes a substantial contribution to media and communication studies. Its principal merit lies in bringing together crisis communication theory, institutional analysis, media framing, and safeguarding practice in a single, globally oriented study.

Scope and contribution

The book is impressive in both scale and intellectual reach, spanning more than 900 pages and combining theoretical, historical, empirical, and normative dimensions. It addresses a major lacuna in scholarship by analyzing the Catholic Church's child sexual abuse crisis specifically through the lens of crisis communication, rather than treating abuse only as a legal, moral, or ecclesial problem. This framing is original and valuable, because it shifts attention from isolated scandal coverage toward communication as part of institutional governance and recovery.

The monograph's contribution is also practical. It does not merely diagnose failure; it proposes communication principles, best practices, and a structured path toward restoring trust, making it highly relevant for both scholars and practitioners.

Research design

Methodologically, the work is unusually rich and triangulated, combining in-depth interviews, surveys, document analysis, and media case studies. The author conducted 30 in-depth interviews and three survey instruments targeting safeguarding delegates and Vatican-accredited journalists, which gives the study empirical depth and an unusual international breadth. The use of both qualitative and quantitative approaches is appropriate for a subject in which institutional narratives, victim experience, and communicative practice intersect.

The author grounds her research in theories of crisis, crisis management, institutional communication, crisis communication and trust management, incorporating elements of leadership, whilst drawing on the classic definitions

of Barton, Fink and Elizalde, as well as the more recent approaches of Coombs and Holladay. In the theoretical section of the monograph (Chapter 1), she distinguishes between a crisis and a scandal, analyses leadership crises, the role of stakeholders (particularly those who have been wronged) and corporate apologies, and presents the stages of rebuilding trust within an organisation following a scandal.

A key element of the theoretical framework is the use of mass media theories: agenda setting, framing and gatekeeping, which serve to analyse media narratives about the Church's abuse crisis. The specific research objectives, described in the abstract and in Chapter 2 of the monograph, include: (C1) an assessment of the global status quo of the Church's crisis communication (with a comparison to the USA), (C2) the identification of best communication practices (with particular reference to the experience of the United States) and (C3) a comparison of media perceptions with the facts and changes within the Church.

In the qualitative section, the author describes the selection of the sample and the conceptualisation of the in-depth interviews conducted with key stakeholders: victims, representatives of church structures, experts and journalists. The process of conducting the interviews, transcribing them and analysing the data is presented transparently, whilst maintaining a high degree of ethical sensitivity to the subject of trauma. The author conducted 30 in-depth interviews with seven categories of respondents (victims, victims involved in institutional activities, cardinals and bishops, directors of child and youth protection offices, victim liaison coordinators, directors and communications specialists, academics—experts), carried out in the USA and Europe between 2020 and 2023.

In the quantitative section, the author describes the sample selection, questionnaire design, method of distribution and analysis of responses, and then presents the results in a comprehensive Chapter 13.

In the quantitative section, three surveys were developed: for national (episcopal) child protection delegates from over 100 episcopal conferences (30% complete responses, all continents), for diocesan child protection delegates in the USA, for journalists accredited to the Holy See. The questionnaires enabled an assessment of the phase of the crisis, communication practices in use, protection structures, the extent to which bishops met with victims, the communication channels utilised, and journalists' expectations.

The source material also includes: state and Church reports (including the John Jay Report, the MHG Report, CIASE, and the Portuguese and Spanish

reports), Church documents (including legislation from the pontificates of John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis—such as *Vos Estis Lux Mundi*, the abolition of papal secrecy, the *Vademecum*), media reports and case studies (Maciel, McCarrick, Pell, Vanier, Rupnik, UN 2014, national cases), as well as the narratives of victims and perpetrators as an element of academic storytelling.

The selection of methods and material is appropriate, ambitious and well-founded—it allows for the combination of global, comparative and local (including Polish) perspectives, and captures both the systemic dimension and the experiences of individuals. At the same time, this selection is also extremely valuable from a media studies perspective—these are the most ‘high-profile’ cases covered by the media worldwide and widely known. The author has carried out painstaking work in compiling both the case studies and possesses expertise in the selection of sources, covering both media documentation and church documents.

Analytical strengths

One of the work’s strongest assets is its sustained attention to victims’ and survivors’ perspectives, which anchors the book ethically as well as analytically. The author’s insistence that communication should be victim-centered and truth-based gives the monograph a distinctive normative coherence. Likewise, the analysis of media narratives through agenda-setting, framing, and gatekeeping is highly relevant to the study of how public understanding of clerical abuse is formed.

The chapters on the United States, Poland, and the Vatican summit of 2019 are particularly valuable because they connect global theory to concrete institutional contexts. The final section, which synthesizes the findings into communication principles and best practices, is likely to be the most widely cited part of the book in applied research and professional training.

The ten crisis principles

A particularly valuable contribution of Guzik’s monograph is the formulation of ten crisis communication principles, which the author presents as a normative and practical framework for institutions confronting the crisis

of child sexual abuse. Their importance lies in the fact that they do not reduce communication to image management; instead, they situate it within truth, responsibility, repair, and institutional conversion. Read together, these principles create a coherent ethics of crisis communication that is both victim-centered and governance-oriented.

The first principle, to own the problem, is foundational because no credible communication can emerge from denial, minimization, or deflection. In crises of abuse, institutions often try to fragment responsibility, but Paulina Guzik rightly argues that only explicit acknowledgment of the problem opens the possibility of reform. This principle is not only rhetorical but structural: it requires leaders to recognize the crisis as their own institutional failure, not as an external reputational inconvenience.

The second principle, to put victims first, gives the monograph its strongest moral direction. It means that the primary reference point for every decision should be the dignity, safety, and voice of those harmed. In practical terms, this requires that communication be measured not by how well it protects institutional prestige, but by whether it helps survivors, prevents further harm, and avoids re-traumatization.

The third principle, to listen, listen, listen, reflects the book's insistence that effective crisis response begins with receptivity rather than messaging. Listening here is not a symbolic gesture but an organizational discipline: institutions must create channels through which victims, families, experts, and communities can speak and be heard. Without this, communication remains one-way and defensive, which deepens mistrust rather than restoring it.

The fourth principle, to tune in emotionally, broadens the notion of institutional communication beyond procedural correctness. Guzik emphasizes that abuse crises are not managed through facts alone, because trauma, shame, fear, anger, and grief are integral to the crisis environment. Communicators who fail to recognize this emotional dimension risk producing statements that are technically accurate but humanly inadequate.

The fifth principle, to speak from the audience's point of view, is especially important for institutions that are accustomed to speaking in their own internal language. Crisis communication becomes effective only when it is translated into the categories, concerns, and expectations of those who are actually receiving the message. In this sense, the principle demands empathy, clarity, and a rejection of clerical or bureaucratic self-reference.

The sixth principle, transparency is the only way, is central to the entire argument of the monograph. Transparency is presented not as a public-relations tactic but as a precondition of credibility and trust recovery. Guzik shows that when institutions attempt concealment, partial disclosure, or strategic ambiguity, they may gain short-term control but lose long-term legitimacy.

The seventh principle, remember who you are: a loving mother, is one of the most distinctive and theologically loaded formulations in the book. It suggests that the Church must communicate not as a self-protecting bureaucracy but according to its own identity as a pastoral and maternal institution. This principle is powerful because it connects communication strategy with institutional self-understanding, implying that authentic messaging must emerge from the institution's deepest values.

The eighth principle, perceptions are as important as facts, captures a core insight of modern crisis communication. Even when an institution believes it has handled a situation correctly, public perception may tell a different story, especially if previous conduct created distrust. Guzik's point is not that facts are irrelevant, but that facts alone do not control meaning; publics interpret institutions through narratives shaped by history, media, and emotion.

The ninth principle, distinguish the court of law from the court of public opinion, is a crucial corrective to institutional defensiveness. Legal processes and communicative processes operate according to different logics and confusing them often leads organizations to hide behind procedural formalism. The monograph convincingly shows that a strictly legalistic response may satisfy internal compliance while failing to address moral responsibility, public concern, and survivor expectations.

The tenth principle, treat media seriously and fairly, reflects the author's dual identity as scholar and journalist. Rather than viewing the media as an enemy, Paulina Guzik treats journalistic scrutiny as a legitimate part of the crisis environment and as a possible ally in accountability. This principle is especially important because it calls institutions to move from confrontation to professional engagement, recognizing that the media can expose abuse, amplify survivors' voices, and pressure organizations toward reform.

Taken together, these ten principles function as more than a list of recommendations. They amount to a comprehensive model of crisis communication grounded in responsibility, empathy, transparency, and institutional conversion. Their strength lies in the fact that they are not merely reactive; they

imply that communication itself must become part of the solution, not an instrument of concealment or self-defense. In that respect, Guzik's framework is one of the most original and practically useful elements of the monograph, and it substantially increases the book's value for both communication scholars and institutional practitioners.

Overall assessment

Overall, Guzik's monograph is a major scholarly achievement that significantly advances research in media and communication studies. The work is especially strong in its empirical ambition, international perspective, and practical relevance for institutions facing high-stakes crises. This monograph is of very high academic value and is distinctly original in nature.

Firstly, it combines in a single work: a systematic presentation of current knowledge on the sexual abuse of minors; an in-depth analysis of the Catholic Church's case from both global and local perspectives; extensive empirical data from the author's own research; and the author's own proposal for communication principles and procedures. Such a comprehensive yet coherent study at the intersection of crisis communication and the issue of abuse within the Church has been lacking in the global literature to date—most works focus either on narrow case studies or on general public relations, failing to achieve a similar level of integration of theory, empirical research and practical recommendations.

Secondly, the way in which the author weaves the perspective of victims into the communication analysis is particularly valuable: numerous examples of victims' narratives, carefully selected case studies and the grounding of communication principles in the experiences of survivors ensure that the study is not merely 'technical', but deeply ethical.

Thirdly, the communication proposal is not a simple 'PR handbook', but is embedded in a reflection on trust, abuse of power, organisational culture and the role of communication as part of governance, rather than a tool for 'quelling a scandal'. The author clearly demonstrates that without linking communication to genuine reform, justice for victims and structural change, there can be no talk of rebuilding credibility.

Fourthly, the chapter devoted to Poland is one of the most authoritative, comprehensive and well-documented studies on the subject: it highlights the

specific nature of the Polish case against the backdrop of other countries, taking into account historical and political contexts, the role of the media, church documents and key issues, as well as best practices that have emerged in recent years.

Dr Paulina Guzik's main academic achievement in the form of this monograph is mature, original and makes a significant contribution to the development of the social communication and media sciences, particularly in the areas of crisis communication, the mediatisation of religion and research into the Church's institutional communication.

The monograph also demonstrates the author's ability to construct a complex research project, make critical use of the literature, work with sensitive empirical material to high ethical standards, and formulate generalisations of theoretical and practical significance.

For a journal in media studies, this would be an appropriate conclusion: the book is not only a study of a crisis, but also a model of how communication research can engage moral urgency without abandoning analytical rigor.