

What to Do When the News Vans Show Up

It's usually not a good day for a parish leader when the Action/Eyewitness/News at 6 vans are parked in the church lot.

Sometimes it means the good news that's preached inside the church will be ignored for the bad news that people will see on television that night.

What to do?

First, find out what they are there for, if you don't know already.

Second, call for backup advice, by contacting the diocesan Department of Communications at 856-583-2851.

The advice will vary according to the situation.

Sometimes, the pastor is the best person to address the media. There are times when those television vans are seeking a story that makes the church look good and those who are ministering on the scene are best-prepared to tell it.

One example: people come to your church for a well-publicized funeral, sometimes of a prominent person or perhaps a tragedy that has garnered big headlines. The church in these cases is seen as a place for solace and comfort. Make sure a single person, usually the pastor, is appointed to formally address the church's viewpoint. Be prepared to say what you want to say. Most of what is said will end up on the cutting-room floor, so make sure what does get aired makes the point you want said.

Or perhaps, usually on a slow news day, the parish has an ethnic festival that a newscast wants to feature. This is usually a win/win situation for all involved: the news crew gets happy, vibrant and colorful footage, and the parish gets known as a place where Catholic immigrants have found a home.

If you don't want the news crews inside the church, stand firm, but be sure to promise them some opportunities for managed shots outside the building on public space that they can use. Be accessible but controlled.

Of course, there are times when the advice will be to direct the reporters to the appropriate diocesan offices, cases often referred to as crisis communications. In these situations, never say "no comment" (that comes across as testy and defensive), but be polite, yet firm, and direct the reporters to the communications office.

Recent cases like these have involved negative reaction to a parish school closing, protests of a parish decision to lease property, and a well-publicized sit-in after a parish decided to close a church. These are hot-button issues. Some have legal ramifications. Sometimes the pastor is the

focus of hostility. When emotions are running high, it's best for a more detached person to provide an official position. One thing to keep in mind: never face a camera when you are angry. That often provides for fiery television, but rarely makes the angry person, no matter how justified, look good.

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan famously posited that television is a "cool" medium. It's best to be in a cool frame of mind when addressing it.

While the vans in the parking lot may be harbingers of bad news, remember that it is possible to, if not control the cameras that never blink, at least to present your parish in the best possible light.