

## *Reflection on the Church's Teachings on Communication on the 40<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Communio et Progressio*

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**O**n 4 December 1963, in the presence of Pope Paul VI, Archbishop Pericle Felici read the Conciliar Decree on the Means of Social Communication, *Inter Mirifica*, which had been approved by 1,960 Council fathers. That document outlined the principles, which should guide the Church's appreciation of and interaction with the media. On 23 March 1971, the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* was promulgated as called for in *Inter Mirifica*, and it spelled out in much greater detail the insights that should guide the Church's engagement in the area of media. Forty years on, it is important to highlight some of the themes that have emerged in subsequent papal teaching.

With concern and appreciation, each of the subsequent popes has engaged with the media of his time. This is in line with the tendency we can see from the earliest times of the Church to adopt to newly emerging means of communication.

The Second Vatican Council represented a key step in this journey. Announced on 25 January 1959, Pope John XXIII convened the meeting to address the problems facing humanity in the modern age and to rediscover the Gospel message. The 1960s were profoundly marked by changes in society and, at that time, due to technological innovations, the media also grew in importance with its extended range of coverage and its more pervasive influence on global society.

At the Second Vatican Council, it was the clear intention of the Council fathers to develop an understanding of the Church as a

community engaged in the common journey of humanity and committed to dialogue and mutual understanding. With regards to communication, the Church wished to confront the challenges emerging from then new media, which even then was changing the ways in which people gained information and in which public opinion was established.

It was necessary therefore to address the question of media with an appropriate consideration of these means of communication in order to be an informed participant in this new era in which the press, radio, film and television were having an increasingly powerful impact on the daily lives of all.

In the more detailed Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, which was published after the Council, but in absolute fidelity to the teachings and insights of the Council, the concern was to understand how media and communications could contribute to the mission of the Church and to the good of all humanity. The 40th anniversary provides us with the opportunity to review the subsequent development of the Church's teaching, especially given the huge transformations that have occurred in media over the intervening years: the emergence of social media, wireless and mobile communication, news, blogs, and the web, all of which are an integral part of everyday life and all of which merit anthropological and ethical consideration.

In *Communio et Progressio*, salvation history was examined through the perspective of communication. Revelation shows the vocation of each human person to search for truth, which finds its culmination when "Christ revealed Himself as the Perfect Communicator" (*Communio et Progressio*, 11). "Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion. At its most profound level it is the giving of self in love." (*Communio et Progressio*, 11) This is realized fully in Christ who in the Incarnation took on the condition of those with whom he intended to communicate. Therefore, human communication has meaning, value and purpose in Christ.

Communication finds its theological basis by being always

oriented towards communion with God, towards our shared humanity in Jesus Christ, and with the invitation to community in the Church. Therefore, every type of communication that helps us to grow in true communion is positive and must be favoured over any negative forms, which lead to rupture or division.

All of our lives as Christians can therefore be defined in terms of communication. As a consequence, even in earlier times, formation has been seen as a key element: *"A training that grounds a person in the basic principles governing the working of the media in human society, as explained above, is nowadays clearly necessary for all."* (*Communio et Progressio*, 64). Formation, of both those transmitting and receiving information, is necessary in order to learn how to use the media in more discerning and creative ways so as to be of service to the human person: *"the media of social communication are for mankind, communicators should be consumed by the desire to serve men. They can only achieve this if they really do know and love their fellow man."* (*Communio et Progressio*, 72)

The Pastoral Instruction closes with the following words, almost as if to anticipate our own era:

The People of God walk in history. As they, who are, essentially, both communicators and recipients, advance with their times, they look forward with confidence and even with enthusiasm to whatever the development of communications in a space age may have to offer. (*Communio et Progressio*, 187)

It is very important to remember that over these last 40 years, the Church has faced the challenges presented by the evolution of social communication in order to review the methods, but not the substance, of its primary mission, which is evangelization. For this reason in 1975, Pope Paul VI when speaking of the media, said:

When they are put at the service of the Gospel, they are capable of increasing almost indefinitely the area in which the Word of God is heard; they enable the Good News to reach millions of people. The Church would

feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect. (Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45)

These themes and new perspectives were further developed on the 20th anniversary of *Communio et Progress* when on 22 February 1992 the Pontifical Council for Social Communications published the Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae*, "at the dawn of a new era", with yet another 'prophetic' approach when seen in light of the current developments, which were almost unthinkable back then.

Communication is seen as a service to evangelization, but in addition to this view, over time and with the Conciliar Decree *Inter Mirifica*, communication gained a wider and increasingly positive understanding in view of its objective to serve the common good. Pope John Paul II summed it up this way:

The first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a 'global village.' (Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 37c)

With that awareness in mind, *Aetatis Novae* entered into the era of increasingly rapid communication and one where the confines were being redrawn. This moment marked only the beginning of a process which would redefine the languages and even cultures of global society, but not the deep relationship of God-Humanity-Communication, as highlighted in the Pastoral Instruction:

Here, in the Word made flesh, God's self-communication is definitive. In Jesus' words and deeds the Word is liberating, redemptive, for all humankind. This loving self-revelation of God, combined with humanity's response of faith, constitutes a profound dialogue. Human history and all human relationships exist within the framework established by this self-communication of God in Christ. History itself is ordered toward becoming a kind of word of God, and it



is part of the human vocation to contribute to bringing this about by living out the ongoing, unlimited communication of God's reconciling love in creative new ways. (Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae*, 6)

The Apostolic Letter, *Rapid Development*, of 24 January 2005, allowed John Paul II to confirm the Church's approach with regards to communication given the incredible developments in technology and the need to underscore always the fundamental ethical and moral dimensions.

Do not be afraid of new technologies! These rank "among the marvelous things" — *inter mirifica* — which God has placed at our disposal to discover, to use and to make known the truth, also the truth about our dignity and about our destiny as his children, heirs of his eternal Kingdom. Do not be afraid of being opposed by the world! Jesus has assured us, "I have conquered the world!" (Jn 16:33) Do not be afraid even of your own weakness and inadequacy! The Divine Master has said, "I am with you always, until the end of the world" (Mt 28:20). Communicate the message of Christ's hope, grace and love, keeping always alive, in this passing world, the eternal perspective of heaven, a perspective which no communications medium can ever directly communicate, "What eye has not seen, and ear has not heard, and what has not entered the human heart, what God has prepared for those who love him" (1 Cor 2:9). (Apostolic Letter *Rapid Development*, 14)

The key insight shaping more insight, shaping more recent reflections on communication has been that the radical transformation in communications is not fundamentally a transformation in the technologies, but more a transformation in the culture of communications. The new technologies allow us to communicate more speedily across wider distances, at cheaper costs, larger volumes of information. However, the most important consequence of this is the changes that have been brought about in the very phenomenon of communication itself. The new

technologies have transformed patterns of learning, news gathering, communication and the formation of public opinion. These changes had been prophetically intuited by John Paul II when he said:

It is also necessary to integrate that message into the “new culture” created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the ‘new culture’ originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology. (Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*, 37c)

In his recent reflections, Pope Benedict has consistently returned to the cultural dimension of communication. In his 42nd Message for World Communications Day (2008), he writes:

The role that the means of social communication have acquired in society must now be considered an integral part of the “anthropological” question that is emerging as the key challenge of the third millennium...so too in the sector of social communications there are essential dimensions of the human person and the truth concerning the human person coming into play. (n. 4)

It is important to underline the media's great responsibility to:

Contribute to making known the truth about humanity, and defending it against those who tend to deny or destroy it. One might even say that seeking and presenting the truth about humanity constitutes the highest vocation of social communications. (n. 5)

What Pope Benedict XVI asks of those working in the diverse world of the media is not only to strive to be professional and to respect ethical norms, but also to exercise a host of moral and intellectual virtues which highlight the often problematical and complex nature of the relationships of the human person with media and communication. In other words, the Pope calls on us to remember always that the media make it possible to create new realities of experience, knowledge and the transmission of culture,

as he suggests in his careful reflection on the technological dimension of the media and its capacity to rearrange the spatial-temporal dimensions of human interaction.

All humanity is at the heart of the Pope's reflections and he has given special attention to children and young people who are the *digital natives* in this context. This is why he notes that, "*The complex challenges facing education today are often linked to the pervasive influence of the media in our world.*" (cfr. *Message for the 41st World Communications Day*, 2007). He gives a clear outline of the complex educational panorama and calls for a sense of collective responsibility.

At the same time he does not exclude the responsibility of the Church and her pastors by recalling that,

The development of the new technologies and of the larger digital world represents a great resource for humanity as a whole and for every individual, and it can act as a stimulus to encounter and dialogue. But this development likewise represents a great opportunity for believers. No door can or should be closed to those who, in the name of the risen Christ, are committed to drawing near to others. To priests in particular the new media offer ever new and far-reaching pastoral possibilities, encouraging them to embody the universality of the Church's mission... (cfr. *Message for the 44<sup>th</sup> World Communication Day*, 2010)

With the developments in technology, the various geographical and cultural contexts have tended to merge together, but the great challenge of the *digital divide* still remains. This is also why Pope Benedict says,

We must, therefore, strive to ensure that the digital world, where such networks can be established, is a world that is truly open to all. It would be a tragedy for the future of humanity if the new instruments of communication, which permit the sharing of knowledge and information in a more rapid and effective manner, were not made accessible to those

who are already economically and socially marginalized, or if it should contribute only to increasing the gap separating the poor from the new networks that are developing at the service of human socialization and information. (cfr. *Message for the 43rd World Communications Day*, 2009).

Apart from this overview of the Church documents dealing with communication, it is of fundamental importance to consider that with these writings, aside from their historical context, there are some key permanent themes. Among them are the Church's relationship with the means of communication, which is inseparable and continues to evolve through an open dialogue. The proclamation of the Good News is an essential dimension and it is a message that is universally relevant for all. It is fundamental to support formation with every means available for religious, lay people, producers and consumers, given the changing cultural context and technological trend towards media convergence.

Since the dawn of humanity, communication has always been an essential part of the human person, since there is a most basic need to express oneself to others, to break out of an isolated world, to overcome barriers and to enter into communication with others, to share one's inner being, created in the image and likeness of God.

There is a line of continuity between the early person who left behind his graffiti inscribed on the walls of caves and those today, who write their own blogs. All are moved by the same desire to express themselves. There is a bond between generations who come together with the same need for friendship (cf. Benedict XVI, *Message for the 43rd World Communications Day*, 2009). Young people and the not so young have discovered this instinctively. The journey is not over yet, and will probably continue indefinitely, but the Church of communication has journeyed and continues to journey alongside humanity.

I would like to conclude with some particular reflections, which may be of specific relevance to Asia.

A key function for those involved in the communications

mission of the Church is to be a voice for the Word of God. This is no easy challenge as it requires serious reflection on how best to make the Word resonate in the different cultural and religious context of Asia. It goes without saying that the proclamation must be done with respect and with a spirit that is informed by the insights of interreligious dialogue — there is no room for superficial or irresponsible proselytism. However, there should be a full proclamation of the Kerygma, and an awareness that it is in the Word of God that a full response is to be found to the deepest yearnings of human beings.

The communication of the Good News of God's love for all people, as expressed in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is what unifies and makes sense of all the other aspects of the life of the Church. This is particularly true of evangelization: communication is not simply one dimension of evangelization; without communication there can be no evangelization.

The understanding of the Church as an agent of evangelization has been expressed forcefully by the Bishops of Latin America in the commitment they formulated at Aparecida: to be a Church "*in a permanent state of mission*". This self-understanding need not be confined to the Church in Latin America. Rather, it is helpful to all of us no matter where we find ourselves. Of equally general application is the definition they offer to explain what it means to proclaim the Kerygma:

The proclamation of the Kerygma is an invitation to grow in appreciation of the life-giving love of God which is offered to us in Christ who died and rose again. This is the first truth we must announce, and also hear again ourselves, so that this grace will enjoy an absolute priority in the Christian life and all the evangelical efforts of the Church. "By the grace of God, I am what I am" (1 Cor. 15,10).

Church communications efforts clearly serve its mandate to be a "universal sacrament of salvation" (*Lumen Gentium*, 48) and to proclaim the Gospel to those who have never heard the name of

Jesus. Our communications, moreover, have a particular role to play in supporting the faith and the sense of belonging of those who already believe, but who live in small communities within the context of cultures where Christians are very much in the minority, and where they may face particular challenges in expressing and celebrating their faith. The words of Pope John Paul II to Radio Veritas in 1995 are relevant to all who contribute to the Church's communication outreach in Asia:

Here I must mention with gratitude the consolation and strength which your broadcasts have provided to the Church of Silence and to all those Christians who have suffered and continue to suffer for their fidelity to the one whom Christ has made the visible foundation of the Church's unity.

*Communio et Progressio* was written in a very particular context and its mission was shaped by that cultural context. Today, we must be equally attentive to the broader context within which we operate. One of the most important features of this context is the emergence of globalization as a worldwide phenomenon, which however has had a particularly strong impact in Asia. Against this background, it is good to recall that all people are called to form one human family and that all the members of that family must be recognized as enjoying the same fundamental dignity and as being entitled to the same rights — this a universal truth, which must be defended also in Asia. Often when we reflect on globalization, we focus on the economic, technical and financial dynamics but we ought to be no less attentive to the human, cultural and spiritual consequences that are associated with the phenomenon.

Asia has seen a particularly dramatic transformation as people leave the continent to seek work in the newly established industrial centres — the changes brought about by this transformation have impacted on families and on long established patterns of community living. Sometimes the competitive ethos that is so strong in some models of economics leaves very little room

for human solidarity. The new economies may offer great opportunities for some, but often at a very significant cost to the less fortunate and to the environment. We must ask the question as to what understanding of human life is being proposed, if not imposed, by these new economic models. Is there a risk that human progress will be measured exclusively in terms of material prosperity and consumerism? Is there any room left for faith and belief or for interior and spiritual values? Church communicators can make a huge contribution to the good of the human family by opposing all systems or philosophies that are reductive of what it means to be human, and that deny human beings their full identity and dignity. This is equally true as regards human culture – some of the values that are being proposed in a more globalized world threaten the flourishing of some of the richness and nobility of the ancient cultural traditions of Asia. As Pope John Paul II said

Globalization must not be a new version of colonialism. It must respect the diversity of cultures which, within the universal harmony of peoples, are life's interpretive keys. In particular, it must not deprive the poor of what remains most precious to them, including their religious beliefs and practices, since genuine religious convictions are the clearest manifestation of human freedom. (Address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences, 27 April 2001)

Church communicators, in fidelity to *Communio et Progressio*, have been particularly engaged in the promotion of social justice, of human rights and dignity, equitable forms of development and the care of the earth. The voice of the Church on these issues has gained us the respect of many non-Christian believers and activists. Their openness to this message should not surprise us. Our sharing of the Church's social teaching can be seen as an expression of love, as a form of charity. It is important that in the presentation of this teaching that we acknowledge its deepest roots in the teaching of Jesus. Catholic social teaching is not just another "enlightened ideology" but is ultimately grounded in the

words and deeds of Jesus, who embodied in his life and death a way of service and love that continues to offer hope to our world. The Christian's programme — the programme of the Good Samaritan, the programme of Jesus — is "*a heart which sees*". This heart sees where love is needed and acts accordingly. (*Deus Caritas Est*)

In trying to seek a balance between finding a way of speaking of Jesus, whose spirit gives life and meaning to our social teaching, and respecting the freedom of those of other religious traditions or none, we can turn with profit to the words of Pope Benedict XVI:

Charity, furthermore, cannot be used as a means of engaging in what is nowadays considered proselytism. Love is free; it is not practised as a way of achieving other ends. But this does not mean that charitable activity must somehow leave God and Christ aside. For it is always concerned with the whole man. Often the deepest cause of suffering is the very absence of God. Those who practise charity in the Church's name will never seek to impose the Church's faith upon others. They realize that a pure and generous love is the best witness to the God in whom we believe and by whom we are driven to love. A Christian knows when it is time to speak of God and when it is better to say nothing and to let love alone speak. (*Deus Caritas Est*, 31).