

Communio et Progressio and Its Impact on the Hong Kong Diocese

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Background

Forty years ago, in 1971, when the Pontifical Social Communication Commission issued the pastoral instruction *Communio et Progressio* (CP), a concrete policy on Mass Media was established. It was a timely document on the communication media, the main thrust of which still inspires media workers today.

Although the instruction was issued six years after Vatican Council II, it should be rightly treated as part of the conciliar documents. Actually at a very early stage of the council, the Council Fathers, when discussing the schema of the *Inter Mirifica* (IM), came to the consensus that the "publication of a pastoral instruction containing practical guidelines" was greatly needed. (Fameree, 2000, p. 175) In fact, on the front page of the instruction, it clearly states:

"COMMUNIO ET PROGRESSIO"

ON THE MEANS OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION
WRITTEN BY ORDER OF THE SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL

In 1992, the Pontifical Social Communication Commission issued another document, *"AETATIS NOVAE"* ON SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS ON THE TWENTIETH ANNIVERSARY OF *COMMUNIO ET PROGRESSIO*.

Now is a good time to commemorate all three of these documents, and review the achievements of Catholic Social

Communication work and its implication for modern cities like Hong Kong.

During Vatican II, the decree IM (1963) recognized the power of mass media, but neglected to point out its advantages. Not until 1971 with the publication of *Communio et Progressio* did the Church authorities admit that "The Church sees the media as 'Gifts of God'." (CP, 2) Dr. Dominic Yung, the director of the Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office, pointed out that in *Communio et Progressio* the Church borrowed an important concept of the communication media from the great scholar of communications Marshall McLuhan (Yung, 2006-7-25). McLuhan suggested: "Media are the Extensions of Man." (McLuhan, 1971, p.100) And since human being are the creation of God, therefore the communication media are also parts of God's creation. So they deserve our appreciation. (Yung, 2006-7-25)

In *Aetatis Novae* (AN), the Commission even declared that it has an obligation to use the mass media. It said, "Along with traditional means such as witness of life, catechetics, personal contact, popular piety, the liturgy and similar celebrations, the use of media is now essential in evangelization and catechesis. Indeed, 'the Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect'." (AN, 11)

From a Proper Choice to a Proper Use of Media

The decree IM stressed very much the responsibility the media has when handling news. However, it also stressed the responsibility of the receivers of news. In paragraph number 9, the Council fathers stressed: "All who, of their own free choice, make use of these media of communications as readers, viewers or listeners have special obligations." The paragraph states:

For a proper choice demands that they fully favor those presentations that are outstanding for their moral goodness, their knowledge and their artistic or technical merit. They ought, however, to avoid those that may be

a cause or occasion of spiritual harm to themselves, or that can lead others into danger through base example, or that hinder desirable presentations and promote those that are evil. (IM 9)

The words “a proper choice” refer to a rather passive attitude. They subconsciously reflect that the Church is only a “receiver” in the field of mass communications. *Communio et Progressio* of 1971 reflects a different emphasis. It stressed: “A proper use of the media of social communication is the responsibility of the entire People of God.” (CP, 4). Here one can see that the Catholic Church’s attitude changes from a passive to a proactive one. The Church should positively make use of mass media to proclaim its message to the whole world. Of course, *Communio et Progressio* does not forget to remind us: Social Communications is a double-edged sword. (CP, 9)

The media of social communication can contribute a great deal to human unity. If, however, men’s minds and hearts are ill disposed, if good will is not there, this outpouring of technology may produce an opposite effect so that there is less understanding and more discord and, as a result, evils are multiplied. (CP, 9)

This makes me think back to the early 19th century, when the first Protestant missionary Robert Morrison published his “A Dictionary of the Chinese Language.” In the introduction he wrote, “Letters and the Press constitute a mighty engine; in itself innocent, but according to its application, productive of good or evil almost infinite.” (Morrison, quoted in Su Jing, 2000, vi)

In *Christifidele Laici* (1988), Pope John Paul II warned his flock that mass media can be a destructive force to pull people away from God.

We furthermore call to mind the violations to which the human person is subjected. When the individual is not recognized and loved in a person’s dignity as the living image of God (cf. Gen 1:26), the human being is exposed to more humiliating and degrading forms of

“manipulation,” that most assuredly reduce the individual to a slavery to those who are stronger. “Those who are stronger” can take a variety of names: an ideology, economic power, political and inhumane systems, scientific technocracy or the intrusiveness of the mass-media. (CL, 5)

This is just one example among many of possible wrong uses of the media. In general, the Catholic Church is more suspicious than welcoming towards the mass media.

***Communio et Progressio* and Its Trans-temporal Vision**

The Instruction is written in a very post-modern way with a strong trans-temporal perspective. If you read the eight questions raised in Section 21, you would probably get the same impression that I have. These eight questions still sound valid today, in the 21st century. They deserve our careful attention. (Lam, 2010, pp. 48-49)

1. How can we ensure that this swift, haphazard and endless stream of news is properly evaluated and understood?
2. How, in a society that is committed to the rights of dissent, is the distinction between right and wrong, and true and false, to be made?
3. How in the face of competition to capture a large popular audience are the media to be prevented from appealing to and inflaming the less admirable tendencies in human nature?
4. How can one avoid the concentration of the power to communicate in too few hands so that any real dialogue is killed?
5. How can one avoid allowing communications made indirectly and through machinery to weaken direct human contact, especially when these communications take the form of pictures and images?
6. When the media invite men to escape into fantasy, what can be done to bring them back to the present reality?

7. How can one stop the media from encouraging mental idleness and passivity?
8. How can one be certain that the incessant appeal to emotion does not sap reason? (CP, 21)

These eight questions are relevant not only for the communication workers of the Roman Catholic Church, but for all the communication workers in the world. Therefore, *Communio et Progressio* should be treated not only as a Church document but as an important document in the total history of human communication. While we are surprised to see the powerful invasion of the Cyber Network into our real world, we should be even more surprised to see that *Communio et Progressio*, in 1971, already recognized the problem of how to return from the cyber world to the real world. Are we not amazed?

Although it never mentioned the term “internet,” the document did point to a development that fits the new age of the internet. In article 91 it stated:

The responsibility of civil authorities over the means of social communication now covers the world, for they have to guarantee the development of social communication for the good of all mankind, and this without selection or discrimination. This development can be secured by the use of international agreements including those that touch on the use of space satellites. (CP, 91)

***Communio et Progressio* Promoted International Cooperation**

Another new initiative of *Communio et Progressio* was the suggestion of the importance of international cooperation among Catholic newspapers. It referred to the nature of the Roman Catholic Church as a universal body. Cooperation within it goes far beyond that of general non-government organizations. *Communio et Progressio* 139 mentioned:

The Catholic press must be able to acquire suitable offices and the proper facilities for obtaining news

reports and features. Otherwise, a Catholic-run press cannot effectively promote dialogue inside the Church and between the Church and the outside world. It must also achieve professional standards in printing up-to-date, accurate and comprehensive news about the life of the Church. In the collecting, collating and passing on of the news throughout the world there is need for cooperation at the international level. (CP, 139)

Strangely enough, *Communio et Progressio* agrees to a certain extent that there should be government sanctions over the management of social communications media. "The role of the civil authorities in this matter is essentially a positive one. Their chief task is not to create difficulties or to suppress, though, at times, corrective measures may become necessary. The Second Vatican Council explained that man's freedom is to be respected as far as possible, and curtailed only when and in so far as necessary. Censorship therefore should only be used in the very last extremity." (CP, 86) Such a contrary approach (at least in the eyes of media practitioners) reminds us that the Roman Catholic Church had in the past been hostile to this new invention: the mass media.

***Communio et Progressio* Pushed the Establishment of a Spokesperson**

Communio et Progressio promoted a new concept of mass communications, which became a hot topic in the Church in the 1970s. The mass media, however, is a double-edged sword. "The media of social communication can contribute a great deal to human unity. If, however, men's minds and hearts are ill disposed, if good will is not there, this outpouring of technology may produce an opposite effect so that there is less understanding and more discord and, as a result, evils are multiplied. Too often, we have to watch social communications being used to contradict or corrupt the fundamental values of human life. The Christian considers these evils as evidence of man's need to be redeemed and freed from that

sin which entered human history with our human ancestors' first fall." (CP, 9) This approach even today is full of insight.

Section 38 points out: "Communicators must give news that is quick, complete and comprehensible. So more and more they have to seek out competent people for comments, background briefings and discussion. Often these comments are required immediately, sometimes even before the expected event has happened. Persons of trust, especially when they are in a position of responsibility or authority, are rightly reluctant to make hasty or unprepared comments before they have had a chance to study a situation and its context."

Then what happens? *Communio et Progressio* mentions that "And so because the media are impelled to demand quick comments, the initiative often passes to men who are less responsible and less well-informed but who are more willing to oblige." (CP, 38) In Rome there is a famous saying: "A real insider cannot tell and the one who tells is not an insider." That is really the case. So CP reminds us that "those acquainted with a given situation should try to prevent this from happening. As far as they can, they should keep themselves up to date so that they themselves can reply and ensure that the public is properly informed." (CP, 38)

How to do this? *Communio et Progressio* suggests we should do something to prevent the deterioration of the situation. We should let the competent people speak. It foresees the situation that when "well known Catholics who go on the air, whether they are clerical or lay, they are automatically regarded as spokespersons of the Church." (CP, 154) It reminds these spokespersons that they "must keep this in mind and try to avoid any confusion arising there from." (CP, 154)

For the same reason, *Communio et Progressio* recommended: "Every bishop, all episcopal conferences or bishops' assemblies and the Holy See itself should each have their own official and permanent spokesperson or press officer to issue the news and give clear explanations of the documents of the Church so that people can grasp precisely what is intended." (CP, 174) The Hong Kong

Catholic Social Communications Office was established in 1973. This was an active response to *Communio et Progressio*.

Conclusion

Communio et Progressio is not only an outcome of IM, but an outcome of all the Vatican II documents. Without the complete discussion, which took place during Vatican II, it would not be easy for people to understand the real meaning of social communications in the Church. So when the Council discussed the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*) and the Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*), the situation of mass communications became easier to understand. Only when Catholics have a new understanding of the world can they understand the meaning of the communications media in the modern world. Actually, *Communio et Progressio* clearly stated that "A deeper and more penetrating understanding of social communication and of the contribution which the media can make for modern society, can be derived from a number of documents issued by the Second Vatican Council." (CP, 2) *Inter Mirifica* was just one among many of these.

In its conclusion, *Communio et Progressio* states: "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." (CP, 187) This was an appropriate attitude for Catholics to have towards the work of communications in the 20th century.

Marshall MacLuhan, in his famous article "Medium is the Message" mentioned that Pope Pius XII was deeply concerned that there be a serious study of the media.

On February 17, 1950, the Pope said: "It is not an exaggeration to say that the future of modern society and the stability of its inner life depend in large part on the maintenance of an equilibrium between the strength of

the techniques of communication and the capacity of the individual's own reaction." (McLuhan, 1971, p. 113)

Inter Mirifica may be treated as the first attempt to arrive at this equilibrium, and *Communio et Progressio* is a further step towards the achievement of this equilibrium. When we treat *Communio et Progressio* as an extension of *Inter Mirifica*, then we can say that these series of documents, beginning with *Inter Mirifica*, can be seen as a new movement inside the Roman Catholic Church.

One of the greatest contributions of *Communio et Progressio* is that it presents an important balance between Communication through mass media and Communication without mass media. That is human communication.

In CP, the commission repeatedly stressed that Jesus was the perfect communicator. (CP, 11, 126) Yes, Jesus was a person who was very keen about personal communication. Person-to-person communication played an important role in Christ's preaching. The document stated:

While He was on earth Christ revealed Himself as the Perfect Communicator. Through His "incarnation," He utterly identified Himself with those who were to receive His communication and He gave His message not only in words but in the whole manner of His life. He spoke from within, that is to say, from out of the press of His people. He preached the Divine message without fear or compromise. He adjusted to His people's way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And He spoke out of the predicament of their time. ... 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. Christ's communication was, in fact, spirit and life. In the institution of the Holy Eucharist, Christ gave us the most perfect and most intimate form of communion between God and man possible in this life, and, out of this, the deepest possible unity between men. (CP, 11)

Our Lord Jesus Christ, who himself had been the victim of mass violence in human history, witnessed through his life that "The opinion of the majority, however, is not necessarily the best or the closest to the truth." (CP, 31)

Compared with *Communio et Progressio*, the conclusion of AN seems rather one-sided. Although it still "affirms once again that the Church 'sees these media as gifts of God' which, in accordance with his providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation" (AN, 22), it concludes:

As the Spirit helped the prophets of old to see the divine plan in the signs of their times, so today the Spirit helps the Church interpret the signs of our times and carry out its prophetic tasks, among which the study, evaluation, and right use of communications technology and the media of social communications are now fundamental. (AN, 22)

While encouraging Church people not to be afraid of mass media, *Communio et Progressio* never forgets to remind us of the importance of personal thinking and personal communication. In the light of the information explosion nowadays in the 21st century, *Communio et Progressio* shows us a far deeper understanding of both the positive and negative sides of mass media. Because of these deep insights, we can say that the teaching in *Communio et Progressio* is still very valid today.

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In-depth Interview:

2006-7-25, in Hong Kong, interview with Dr. Dominic Yung, Director of Hong Kong Catholic Social Communications Office.