

The Role of Mass Communications in Evangelization

NEA CONFERENCE Dallas, TX, USA - January 30, 2009

by

Archbishop Claudio M. Celli, President - Pontifical Council for Social Communications

I would like to begin my talk this afternoon with two quotations from the recently deceased Cardinal Avery Dulles. The first quotation sees Dulles grappling with the inner mystery of the Trinity: The Trinity is communication in absolute, universal perfection, a totally free and complete sharing among equals. In generating the Son as word, the Father totally expresses himself ... the Holy Spirit completes the intradivine process of communication. (The Craft of Theology, From Symbol to System. 1992). The second quote finds Dulles teasing out the implications of his understanding of the Trinity for the life of the Church: The entire work of creation, redemption, and sanctification is a prolongation of the inner processions within the Trinity. Creation is ascribed to the Father, who thereby fashions finite images and vestiges of his Son. Redemption is attributed to his Son, who communicates himself to human nature in the Incarnation. Sanctification is appropriated to the Holy Spirit who communicates himself to the Church, the communion of saints. The mystery of divine communication, therefore, permeates any area of theology ... Because Christianity is the religion of the Triune God, it is pre-eminently a religion of communication. (The Craft of Theology, From Symbol to System. 1992).

I have taken these very rich insights as my starting point, not simply to evoke the memory of a great theologian, but because they remind us that communication is not just another activity of the Church but is at the very essence of its life. 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. Proposition 38 from the recent Synod on the Word of God echoes this insight: The mission to announce the Word of God is the responsibility of all the disciples of Jesus Christ by virtue of their baptism. The awareness must be deepened in every parish, and in every Catholic community and organization: they must find ways to bring the Word of God to all, especially to those who have been baptized but who have not been adequately evangelized. The Word of God became flesh so as to communicate himself to all men and women; a particularly privileged way of knowing this Word is therefore in encountering witnesses who make it present and alive. This proposition serves to remind us, also, that communication is not simply a verbal activity but that every aspect of the life of the church can be and ought to be communicative. It is in this context, that I want to begin to focus on my precise topic - the role of mass communications in evangelization. The mass media and the new ICTs have a very important role in the communications mission of the Church but they are, in the final analysis, only part of the story of that communicative reality. The preferred use of the term, social communications, in many of our Church documents serves to remind us that there is a communicative dimension to every aspect of Church life and that we must not think exclusively in terms of our relations with the mass media or the new emerging media. Notwithstanding these qualifications, it remains true that the mass media - traditional and new alike - provides us with a privileged way of bringing our message to ever greater audiences and in a variety of different ways. This role was recognized again at the recent Synod - in their Message, the Synod members reminded us: the voice of the divine word must echo even

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through the radio, the information highway of the internet, the channels of "on line" virtual circulation, CDs, DVDs, podcasts, etc. It must appear on all television and movie screens, in the press, and in cultural and social events.

The Synod, however, was equally attentive to the cultural aspects of this mission. This new communication, in relationship to the traditional one, has created its own specific and expressive grammar and, therefore, makes it necessary not only to be technically prepared, but also culturally prepared for this task. Those wishing to communicate effectively and fruitfully must be both technically competent and fully attentive to the culture of the environment within which they are operating. I would suggest that there are two dimensions to this required cultural attentiveness; in the first place, it is important for the communicator or evangelist to know the general culture of his or her intended audience - to know their cares and concerns, their fears and their hopes; in the second place, he or she must be familiar with the specific culture challenges presented by the new media environment where significant changes in patterns of media consumption have been brought about by the changes in technologies.

In terms of the general cultural context, I would contend that we must remain very hopeful. My reason for this is ultimately theological. Christian anthropology, the Christian understanding of what it means to be human, begins from the insight that all human beings are made in the image and likeness of God: this is seen as a universal truth about our nature and does not depend on whether humans themselves recognise God or not. To be human, therefore, is to exist in relation to God whether one believes or not. Having been created in the image and likeness of God, it is rooted in our human nature that we should desire to be loved and to love. This insight gives me absolute confidence that the core message of the Gospel will continue to resonate in the hearts of humans. Moreover, the basic command of Jesus that we should love one another and that we should express that love in the service of our neighbour, especially our poorest neighbour, offers to humans a way of living that will enable them to be fully human, and societies to flourish.

It can seem at times in our increasingly secularized West that people are moving ahead and getting on with their lives without any obvious need of God. If they have any idea of God at all, it seems to be an image of a God who is very far removed from the reality of their lives. In good times, people seem to make sense of life and find purpose in the everyday realities of work, family and recreation. There are times, however, when people find themselves forced to confront deeper questions - this is particularly true at times of death and illness, at times of personal or economic insecurity and even on occasions of profound joy and happiness when the ordinary narratives of secularism and consumerism prove inadequate to the task of making sense of life. The French theologian, Rene Latourelle, spoke of these moments as "points of insertion" as times when people are particularly open to the Gospel message. Pope Benedict XVI, during his visit to Lourdes last September, noted this current situation and the challenge of belief in our modern societies. He said: "Now, and above all, it is time to work towards a genuine spiritual liberation. Man is always in need of liberation from his fears and his sins. Man must ceaselessly learn or relearn that God is not his enemy, but his infinitely

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good Creator. Man needs to know that his life has a meaning, and that he is awaited, at the conclusion of his earthly sojourn, so as to share for ever in Christ's glory in heaven. Your mission is to bring the portion of the People of God entrusted to your care to recognize this glorious destiny." (Meeting with the French Bishops' Conference, Lourdes, 14 September 2008)

Our mission is to bring the Good News of God's infinite love for all to our brothers and sisters as the greatest service we can give to them. Our evangelization is never about building up our own numbers or about increasing our influence but is always concerned with liberating people from the false gods that can so easily and stealthily invade their existences. John Paul II brought to the fore the drama of this situation when speaking about Europe in 1995, but what he had to say was by no means relevant only to Europe: "at the root of this loss of hope is an attempt to promote a vision of man apart from God and apart from Christ. This sort of thinking has led to man being considered as 'the absolute centre of reality, a view which makes him occupy - falsely - the place of God and which forgets that it is not man who creates God, but rather God who creates man. Forgetfulness of God led to the abandonment of man'. It is therefore 'no wonder that in this context a vast field has opened for the unrestrained development of nihilism in philosophy, of relativism in values and morality, and of pragmatism - and even a cynical hedonism - in daily life'. European culture gives the impression of "silent apostasy" on the part of people who have all that they need and who live as if God does not exist".

In addition to the general cultural awareness, about which I have been talking, there is also the need to attend to the specific media culture that is coming into being in the context of the on-going revolution in the technologies of communication. We are living through a time of profound change in the world of communications. Commentators often speak of a digital revolution to indicate the extraordinary developments in the technologies of communications we have witnessed over the last two decades - computers are smaller, more powerful and more affordable, mobile telephony has connected people all over the world, satellites allow simultaneous global transmission of news and events and the internet itself has created new possibilities for the communication of information, knowledge and learning. It would be a mistake, however, to see these changes as merely technological; they have also revolutionized the culture of communications. They have changed the ways people communicate, the ways they associate and form communities, the ways by which they learn about the world, the ways in which they engage with political and commercial organizations.

As a community of believers committed to making known to all people the Good News of the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the Church is challenged to consider how it will seek to communicate its message in the context of a new emerging culture of communications. Traditionally, we have thought of new means and technologies of communication as instruments to be put into the service of the transmission of the Word - *Evangelii Nuntiandi* characterized the new means as a "modern and effective version of the pulpit". The challenge today is to understand that the new technologies are not just instruments of communication but are profoundly affecting the very culture of communications.

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Commentators point out that "digital communication" is marked by multi-mediality (users of new media often are engaging simultaneously with different forms of media), inter-mediality (the convergence and integration of different types of media) and portability. Taken together these phenomena have transformed patterns of media use and consumption. Whereas in the past, we tended to see the reader, listener or watcher of media as a passive spectator of centrally generated content, it is clear that today we must understand the audience as more selectively and interactively engaging with a wider range of media. The logic of communications has been radically changed - the focus on the media has been replaced by a concentration on the audience which is increasingly autonomous and deliberative in its consumption of media.

The new media undoubtedly offer the Church a greater opportunity to disseminate the Word of God more widely and more directly. It is possible, using the new technologies, to present the timeless message of God's love for his people more attractively and in ways that may engage new audiences. We need to study and understand the new patterns of media use and how they affect the formation of public opinion. We need to understand better how our message is being heard and understood by different audiences. We have always, and rightly, been attentive to the content of our teaching; today we must be more attentive to our audience, or the multiple audiences we address, and understand their concerns and questions. We need to understand better, and take account of, the contexts and environments in which they will encounter the Word of God. The emergence of the internet as an interactive medium, where users seek to engage as subjects and not just as consumers, invites us to develop more explicitly dialogical forms of teaching and presentation.

The Word of God forges communities of believers. Proclamation of the Word of God in a digital age requires that we are attentive to the importance of digital communities and networks. These communities are formed by the active engagement and contributions of the participants who create them. We must enable the believers of our times to bring the Eternal Word into these new communities; we must form them so that they can address the questions and needs of their contemporaries. In his recently published Message for World Communications Day, Pope Benedict addressed himself particularly, albeit not exclusively, to the digital generation. He entrusted the evangelization of the digital continent to young Catholics: It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this "digital continent". He also alerted them to be attentive to the specific culture of this continent: the proclamation of Christ in the world of new technologies requires a profound knowledge of this world if the technologies are to serve our mission adequately.

This "digital continent" is a virtual one, with no physical dimensions but where almost one third of all humans - especially the young and children, but also common citizens, scientists, academics and businesspeople - come together to seek information, to express their views and to grow in understanding. In this nowhere land of shared time and meanings, individuals encounter other individuals, communities, associations, and institutions. The old means of communications are integrated in a new paradigm of interaction: books, press, radio, movies

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and TV reinforce their contents and echo through the Internet. There they are re-interpreted by millions of people who recreate and transform the messages by giving them their own new meaning and by sharing them with others. God and religion are not excluded from this mediasphere; quite the opposite, both have a new social role in it, and are subject of debate in a kind of global "search for meaning". The Church is part of this chorus, one voice among others, proclaiming the image of God which the Lord Jesus Christ revealed in the Gospel.

The Church is already well established on this continent. The Holy See, many Episcopal Conferences and Dioceses and significant numbers of parishes, religious orders and Catholic organization have web-sites. Many bishops, priests, religious and lay people are present on the Web with blog-sites, pod-casts and video content. Others have developed web-sites that promote spirituality, justice, care of the environment and promotion of the value of life. There is even a social network developed specifically for Catholics, XT3.com, as well as many personal and institutional presences on the better known social networks. The Church is present, but so far we are just at the beginning of a journey. We need to develop a more strategic and integrated presence. We must move forward together to ensure a more efficient, articulated and cohesive presentation of the Good News. We must enhance communion between the thousands of initiatives that are already emerging. Each one has its own particular charism and rationale, but each one is called to reflect the universal mission of the Church. The new digital culture has strengthened the possibilities for networking and is leading to various forms of collaboration; the Church has always understood itself as a "network". In the best networks, each node continues to be itself but it is integrated into a greater unity to which it makes its contribution while being supported and complemented by the contributions of other nodes.

In this regard, I wish to highlight a project currently being developed in collaboration with the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Intermirifica.net is a new universally accessible web database of Catholic radio and television broadcasters and producers. The database will be interactive so that registered users can update their own profile. The goal is to help Catholic media personnel to network with one another through a centralized, and in part, user-managed database. The site is still being tested and has yet to be translated into English and French, and hopefully other languages. The hope is also to expand the database to include listings of Catholic podcasting, news agencies, newspapers, and the communications departments of Catholic universities.

I would like to conclude my speech by commenting on the recent initiative of the Holy See to launch its own channel on Youtube. This event, which attracted extraordinary levels of media attention, is just one example of how the Church is looking to the new media as a way of communicating its message to the world. I was somewhat surprised with some of the reactions to this initiative. One of my colleagues said he thought the Pope was "letting himself down" and that the initiative was "beneath" him. I think this attitude betrays a lack of awareness of the motivation for this initiative; it is not a "media stunt" to attract attention but is a sincere effort to bring the Pope's message to one of the places where young people, especially, are to be found. It provides them with direct access to his presence and his

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teaching. Just as recent Popes have made great pilgrimages to every corner of our world; it should not surprise us that Pope Benedict is setting out to the corners of the digital world in his determination to bring the Good News to all. This initiative also represents an effort to take a step into the world of "inter-activity", the new service allows those who visit the site to post comments. While these comments are not being published and it is not yet possible to begin to respond to them; they will be studied with attention and will help the Church to listen to new voices.

The Church is committed to engaging with the new media and the new culture of communication they are bringing into being: we must be willing to venture forth with faith and with a willingness to learn as we journey. The commitment to reach out to others requires that we are willing to change in order to be more eloquent and more authentic witnesses to the faith that we proclaim. The evangelization of the media and by the media cannot happen without "metanoia" or conversion in our lives. The often quoted observation of Marshall McLuhan - the medium is the message - finds a renewed pertinence in this context. "For from the fullness of the heart, the mouth sings. A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness" (Matt 12, 34-35).

In this year of Saint Paul, we must be attentive to the example of the Apostle of the Nations, whose commitment to proclaim the Good News to all people lead him not just to travel tirelessly but also to strive selflessly to understand those he wished to evangelize. Although I am free in regard to all, I have made myself a slave to all so as to win over as many as possible. To the Jews I became like a Jew to win over Jews; to those under the law I became like one under the law--though I myself am not under the law--to win over those under the law. To those outside the law I became like one outside the law--though I am not outside God's law but within the law of Christ--to win over those outside the law. To the weak I became weak, to win over the weak. I have become all things to all, to save at least some. All this I do for the sake of the gospel, so that I too may have a share in it. (1 Cor. 9, 19 -23).