

Identity and Dialogue:
In Service to the Evangelical Mission of the Church

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A common rule for dialogue is to define your terms. A Catholic, a Hindu and an atheist would each conjure up a different idea if I said the word, “god.” Since we’re not in that mixed company today I need not define “God”, yet “dialogue” and “identity” invoke the rule, even in Catholic company because we likely each have a different definition of identity and dialogue. What’s more, it is necessary for us to clearly grasp the meaning and consequences of these two words, that we may, for example, have that fruitful dialogue with the atheist and the Hindu about God.

You see, not having a clear definition of a word and then ordering work according to that vague understanding, or really lack of understanding, can have disastrous consequences in our work of evangelization. Likewise, operating under differing definitions within an apostolate, or the Church as a whole, would be a source of confusion and conflict and give the appearance of schizophrenia rather than the unity of the Body of Christ, which we must exhibit. Similarly, operating with a worldly definition can render our efforts ineffective.

As Catholic communicators it is vital that we clearly understand the nature of identity and dialogue, the relationship of identity to dialogue, and how our understanding affects the concrete practice of our media efforts, if we expect to be true ambassadors for Christ in the milieu of modern society, in politics and in religion.

For us as Catholics, identity has a very rich and multifaceted definition. It includes not only the subjective elements of an individual’s personality, but all of the elements which constitute a human person, that is their entire rational nature. Above and beyond this, identity encompasses the ecclesial dimension, for we are not our own. We have been purchased by the blood of Jesus Christ. Our Baptism more surely incorporates us into the Mystical Body of Christ than any relationship we can effect on earth. For the Catholic, his identity must always have reference to the Body of Christ. This reference is not one which can be merely added up alongside other aspects of identity, but is an essential and inextricable element.

The Church is missionary by nature. The Church exists to evangelize. The identity of the Christian is, therefore, not merely a static participation in the Body, but dynamic and ever a participation in the Church’s mandate to go and teach all nations. A Christian’s identity is missionary. This missionary drive is, or rather should be present, implicitly or explicitly in a Christian’s dialogue with each and every person. This is especially true for us.

Even apart from our incorporation into Christ through Baptism, each human person’s identity must have reference to God, since each person made in God’s image. Not only are we made in His image, we are made *for* Him. This essential reflection of God cannot be separated, even from the non-baptized or the obstinate sinner. Jesus Christ fully reveals man to himself, all mankind, no matter his relationship to the Church. Whether or not man accepts, rejects or ignores this truth, it is, nevertheless, an essential part of the human identity.

This reference to Christ, whether intimately through Baptism, or more remotely based upon being created in God’s image, is inextricable and has profound consequences in terms of establishing fruitful dialogue.

Yet dialogue has many definitions. The definition which likely comes to the mind of the average person would likely be something resembling “a conversation or exchange of ideas.” True enough, insofar as it goes. Yet the reality is deeper, richer and comes with prerequisites.

A dialogue is more than just a conversation, it is a reasoned working through of ideas. To have this working through of ideas presupposes an understanding of your own ideas, a commonality of terms and a willingness to understand the ideas of the other. To borrow Paul’s metaphor of the ambassador, the ambassador must first know the mind of the King before he can represent him in dialogue. He must then know the language of the other and what their words mean. Lastly, he must seek to understand the mind of the other to work through the subject of the dialogue. This is absolutely fundamental. Paul VI makes this point in *Ecclesiam Suam*. This is clear to us if we consider it for a moment. To exchange an idea you must first possess it. As the maxim says, “*Nemo dat quod non habet*” - you cannot give what you do not possess. Dialogue requires that we know and believe the Faith, that we know Jesus Christ as our Redeemer. As a professional Catholic communicator it is a *non-sequitur* to expect to dialogue about the Faith if we are not highly formed in it. Moreover as members of the Body and ambassadors for Christ, we seek to convey not merely ideas but the person of Jesus Christ. Ideas and concepts do not bring about salvation. Jesus Christ does. We have seen disastrous consequences in the United States from well-intentioned but uninformed or malformed Catholics in Catholic media and official communications positions, as well as among Catholic educators and pastors who dialogue in their respective spheres. The crisis of dialogue, at least in the United States, is primarily a crisis of faith, not of modes or methodologies.

Today, a commonality of terms and a willingness to understand the other are also frequently absent in so-called dialogues. In today’s dictatorship of relativism words are frequently robbed of their traditional or common meaning and arbitrarily given opposite or twisted meanings to serve a particular narrow self interest or ideology based upon the accumulation and use of power, rather than progress through mutual understanding and agreement. Too often dialogues are reduced to the sad reality of concurrent monologues, not seeking understanding of the other, but the imposition of one’s will over another.

We see then, as a Catholic communicator that our own identity is the first element necessary to participate in dialogue. There is a priority in time and in being to faith and a knowledge of the Faith in any dialogue. This applies to the average Catholic in living out their missionary mandate as well. Two people not knowing what and who they are cannot engage in dialogue. Therefore, a failure of catechesis gives rise to lack of dialogue with the culture. As communicators, there is a priority in our need to help communicate the Faith, to Catholics especially, and also to others that dialogue may occur. Pope John Paul II highlighted this priority of forming the identity of Catholics in *Catechesi tradendae*:

“The more the Church, whether on the local or the universal level, gives catechesis priority over other works and undertakings the results of which would be more spectacular, the more she finds in catechesis a strengthening of her internal life as a community of believers and of her external activity as a missionary Church” (n. 15).

This has ramifications for dialogue, in general, and specifically for Catholic media as it explicitly strives to dialogue with mankind for its salvation. It is our own identity and the identity of each and every Catholic, founded upon our unity with Jesus Christ, which strengthens our internal and external dialogues. To rephrase Pope John Paul's words, the more the Church strengthens the identity of her members, the more fruitful will be her internal life *and* her missionary dialogue with the world.

The confusion caused within the Church by a lack of understanding of the role of Catholic identity on her ability to communicate Christ and Pope John Paul II's emphasis on first forming that identity of Catholics in order to strengthen her missionary activity impelled the Catholic Radio Association to produce a framework of the various elements of the message in Catholic media. The purpose of the framework is to help Catholics in Catholic media sift through the many conflicting and competing theories and fads and prioritize their efforts to have the most widespread and lasting impact on the Church and the world.

As we've said, the message of a Catholic communicator conveys not merely ideas, but the person of Jesus Christ. So, even though a Catholic and secular message may have the same constitutive elements, conveying the person of Christ fundamentally changes the priority and relationship of those elements. Whereas in conventional communications the elements may have a certain parity, the Catholic message contains two broad divisions. To use an Aristotelian definition of them (remember, we want to define our terms) the Catholic message can be separated into the substance and the accidents.

Content – In Catholic media the substance of the show is its content. These are the truths of the Faith which are being conveyed, or more precisely, the truth which Jesus is. As Archbishop Foley wrote in *Aetatis Novae*, Jesus is “the content and the dynamic source” (n. 6) of the message. Pope John Paul II put it this way on his visit to America,

“everyone should keep in mind that the vital core of the new evangelization must be a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the person of Jesus Christ, that is, the preaching of his name, his teaching, his life, his promises and the Kingdom which he has gained for us by his Paschal Mystery” (*Ecclesia in America* n. 66).

It is this content which we are called to take and teach to all nations. It is the content which is active, efficacious and brings about the conversion of the sinner. The content of the message is its primary, essential, efficacious and unchanging element. It is conveyed by those elements which are secondary, variable and adaptable to the circumstances of the dialogue.

Accessibility – the ability of the content to be understood by the listener/viewer based upon their age, intelligence or circumstance. In *Ecclesiam Suam* Pope Paul VI writes about the characteristics of Clarity - that language must be easily understood, and Prudence – that allowance be made for the psychological and moral circumstance of the hearer.

Pope John Paul II wrote, “it is necessary to inculturate preaching in such a way that the Gospel is proclaimed in the language and in the culture of its hearers.” He went on to clarify that in this accommodation of culture, “however, it must not be forgotten that the Paschal Mystery of Christ, the supreme manifestation of the infinite God within the finitude of history, is the only valid point of reference for all of humanity” (*Ecclesia in America*, 70).

Style – the way in which the host speaks, interacts with the listener and delivers the content. Paul VI wrote about the necessity of the message being proclaimed with meekness, yet with confidence (cf. *Ecclesiam Suam*, 81).

Need – does the show fill an actual need in the community. Is the production applicable to actual needs in the community as opposed to merely an intellectual romp on some arcane topic? Is the production a duplication of something which is already being produced well? (This raises a practical question of whether several shows of the same Style, Topic, Format, etc. are necessary or whether a need can be filled by distributing others' productions?)

Format – live call in, preaching, interview, book review, devotion, etc.

Topic – the specific issue or subject matter of the production. This could be a discussion of salvation by faith alone, or of the Eucharist, or the application of a principle of social doctrine.

Personal – the inclusion of local talent and/or guests. This element can add familiarity and trust with the host or guest. It may also arouse a particular interest in a production because of the local element.

Production values - audio or video quality, background noise levels, static, aesthetic quality of the set, etc.

Mode – mode of the message, i.e., radio, internet stream, You Tube video, podcast, blog or even in-person delivery.

Each of the accidental elements of a production is not equal. The importance of each element may fluctuate depending upon the other elements. We can certainly exchange some of the headings and massage the definitions according to our particular mode of communication, that is, we could play with the accidentals of the accidentals. Yet, the goal of the framework is to help us distinguish the constitutive elements of our productions so that we may understand and refine the appropriate parts which are lacking. More importantly, the framework helps us to emphasize that central element of a Catholic production which is most essential, the absence of which no amount of accidental elements can compensate.

While each of us may agree with Archbishop Foley and Pope John Paul II on the necessity of proclaiming the person of Christ, we can be tempted to see the accidents as more important in getting someone to listen to our production. This disorder can come from two directions. First, as Pope Paul VI warns:

“[t]he danger remains. Indeed, the worker in the apostolate is under constant fire. The desire to come together as brothers must not lead to a watering down or whittling away of truth. Our dialogue must not weaken our attachment to our faith. Our apostolate must not make vague compromises concerning the principles which regulate and govern the profession of the Christian faith both in theory and in practice. An immoderate desire to make peace and sink differences at all costs (irenism and syncretism) is ultimately nothing more than skepticism about the power and content of the Word of God which we desire to preach” (*Ecclesiam Suam*, 88).

The other disorder comes from a mindset formed in a secular model where all the elements of the framework have parity, not surprising since the content of a secular show is just one temporal

element like the others, or more likely, where the style of the host is seen as *the* key ingredient of a successful show.

But Catholic media is not secular media. We are not merely technicians, or even artists, assembling and mixing the elements of Catholic media in a particular fashion as if there were a particular recipe which would effect a desired result in the listener. Moreover, the power of Jesus Christ can bring about conversion if the temporal elements of a production are poor or poorly integrated, but no amount of temporal elements will bring about the conversion of a sinner.

The identity of a Catholic is fundamentally different from the identity of a non-Christian. A Catholic's identity is inseparable from his or her identity as a member of the Body of Christ. Therefore, a Catholic's dialogue with another cannot be understood fully, nor accomplished, without reference to the Church's missionary mandate.

As Catholic communicators we have a solemn obligation to understand these differences, deepen our identity as ambassadors for Christ, and allow that identity to be the source and driving force of our dialogue with the world.

to incorporate them into our work, and to We are not merely technicians

Priority of content to form identity and then method to facilitate dialogue, ambassador must know the mind of the King and then know the other with whom we would dialogue we must first know to share and then learn the mind of the other

Christ can work through even bad accidental elements

What are the ramifications for our work? Self awareness

90. However, leaving aside this aspect of the matter, We want to stress once more the very important place that preaching still has, especially in the modern Catholic apostolate and in connection with the dialogue

Concentric circles: Mankind, Worshippers of God, Christians, Catholics.

What is identity? encompasses all the characteristics to make up our personhood (nature-essential activities, individual substance of a rational nature, i.e. self aware and self determining), not merely personality

Fruit of ecumenism with this lack of internal identity