



The Holy See

ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II TO THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

Thursday 27 February 1986 My dear Brother Bishops,

Dear Friends in Christ,

1. It is indeed a pleasure for me to be with you as you meet to discuss the ways in which the communications media can be used to share the message of God's love, to make better known the "Good News" of Christ.

Fifteen years ago, at the direction of the Second Vatican Council (*Inter Mirifica*, 23), your Commission published the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* on the communications media, public opinion and human progress.

This year, the theme for World Communications Day, an observance held also at the direction of the Second Vatican Council, is "Social Communications and the Christian Formation of Public Opinion".

2. This theme also seems to sum up quite well the aims of the Pontifical Commission: to promote and support through the various means of social communication the Church's activity in the world, in such a way as to educate and form the faithful and all people of good will in authentically human and Christian values.

In this important and delicate task, the Pontifical Commission is called upon to encourage, in the first place, initiatives aimed at spreading Christ's message and the true teaching of the Church. In particular, it will assist and support the efforts in the field of social communications made by the special Commissions set up by individual Episcopal Conference. It will likewise assist in this field the work of the International Catholic Organizations.

3. In the document prepared fifteen years ago, your Commission stated, "More than ever before, the way people live and think is profoundly affected by the means of communication" (*Communio et Progressio*, 1).

What are the attitudes and values people draw from the communications media? How is the way they live and think so profoundly affected?

One method is through role models. The communications media make some people particularly well known. Such

popularity or notoriety brings with it a certain credibility or at least a power to influence.

The leading figures in the communications media should realize the influence they have and the responsibility such influence represents. People are often led to imitate or at least to accept the conduct of the famous; and the fame brought by the communications media can be used to inspire goodness and generosity or to appear to give approval to what is selfish and sinful.

The Church has a special responsibility to encourage those who exercise such an influence over others to recall their own God-given dignity and their particular vocation to give good example, not only in the roles they select or in public utterances, but especially in their private lives which so many others consider as models or at least as justification for their own activity.

A ministry to those in the communications media, therefore, should include not only an openness to provide needed information and technical advice but especially a sensitivity to the intense pressures which communicators can experience and the special need they have for moral and spiritual support and encouragement.

4. Another method in which public opinion is profoundly affected is through the selection of material to treat or the choice of material to treat or the choice of an approach to take.

Why is it, for example, that, in the often commendable reports on the violation of human rights narrated by the news media or dramatized in television or radio programmes, the right of individuals to practise and proclaim their religious faith is so often overlooked? Why is it that the right of parents not only to have children but also to educate those children according to their conscience is so often ignored?

In many instances, the determination of the agenda of modern society is profoundly influenced by the news and entertainment media, and those who choose the agenda should realize their responsibility to contribute not only to the material progress but especially to the moral and spiritual well-being of the human family.

5. In selecting role models to imitate, themes to treat and approaches to take, those in the communications media should be eager to work towards a public moral consensus, towards the construction of what some thinkers have called a "public philosophy". Such a public philosophy should certainly include a recognition of the need for personal honesty and integrity, for sound and stable family life, for responsible stewardship of personal possessions and for community awareness of and care for the weaker members of society - the sick, the handicapped, the elderly, the young, the poor and, in these days especially, the unborn, who are the weakest and most defenceless members of human society.

It has been said that newspaper columns, radio microphones and television cameras constitute a pulpit from which modern society draws much of its moral and spiritual orientation. If that is true, it is essential that the Church should not only participate in the formulation of the public philosophy which will represent the shared values of contemporary society, but that she should also be directly present in this new pulpit with her own newspapers and magazines, her own radio and television stations and programmes, her own voice of truth and love.

6. There are those who think that what is not recognized by and reported by newspapers, radio and television is not important. Thus, it is indispensable that the Church should not only work to achieve recognition of sound moral and spiritual values by the press, cinema, radio and television, but that she should proclaim the Gospel directly through the modern means of communication. If those who seek to promote commercial products and professional services consider it essential to bring their message to the attention of the public through the communications media, how can the Church fail to proclaim and share through the communications media the priceless message of the Gospel?

The Church thus has a ministry to communicators and a ministry of communication. Within the Church, this twofold ministry can foster that communion in Christ emphasized by the recent Synod of Bishops. In the world at large, this ministry can foster that community of concern so essential to the articulation of a sound public philosophy and to the achievement of true peace. It can promote the recognition of the rights and responsibilities of every person as a child of God - God who has communicated to us life itself and his saving message through the Word made flesh, our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ.

I am deeply grateful to all of you for your partnership in the Gospel, and for all that you do through the means of social communication "that the word of the Lord may speed on and triumph" (*2 Thess. 3, 1*).

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