

The Pope's Parting Words on Media

Written by

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the Church is not only called upon to use the mass media to spread the Gospel but, today more than ever, to integrate the message of salvation into the "new culture" that these powerful means of communication create and amplify. It tells us that the use of the techniques and the technologies of contemporary communications is an integral part of its mission in the third millennium.

Moved by this awareness, the Christian community has taken significant steps in the use of the means of communication for religious information, for evangelization and catechesis, for the formation of pastoral workers in this area, and for the education to a mature responsibility of the users and the recipients of the various communications media.

3. Many challenges face the new evangelization in a world rich with communicative potential like our own. Because of this, I wanted to underline in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* that the first Areopagus of modern times is the world of communications, which is capable of unifying humanity and transforming it into "as it is commonly referred to" "a global village". The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial, and social behavior. We are dealing with a complex problem, because the culture itself, prescinding from its content, arises from the very existence of new ways to communicate with hitherto unknown techniques and vocabulary.

Ours is an age of global communication in which countless moments of human existence are either spent with, or at least confronted by, the different processes of the mass media. I limit myself to mentioning the formation of personality and conscience, the interpretation and structuring of affective relationships, the coming together of the educative and formative phases, the elaboration and diffusion of cultural phenomena, and the development of social, political and economic life.

The mass media can and must promote justice and solidarity according to an organic and correct vision of human development, by reporting events accurately and truthfully, analyzing situations and problems completely, and providing a forum for different opinions. An authentically ethical approach to using the powerful communication media must be situated within the context of a mature exercise of freedom and responsibility, founded upon the supreme criteria of truth and justice.

II. Gospel Reflection and Missionary Commitment

4. The world of mass media also has need of Christ's redemption. To analyze with the eyes of faith the processes and value of communications, the deeper appreciation of Sacred Scripture can undoubtedly help as a "great code" of communication of a message which is not ephemeral, but fundamental for its saving value.

Salvation History recounts and documents the communication of God with man, a communication which uses all forms and ways of communicating. The human being is created in the image and likeness of God in order to embrace divine revelation and to enter into loving dialogue with Him. Because of sin, this capacity for dialogue at both the personal and social level has been altered, and humanity has had to suffer, and will continue to suffer, the bitter experience of incomprehension and separation. God, however, did not abandon the human race, but sent his own Son (Cf. Mk 12:1-11). In the Word made flesh communication itself takes on its most profound saving meaning: thus, in the Holy Spirit, the human being is given the capacity to receive salvation, and to proclaim and give witness to it before the world.

5. The communication between God and humanity has thus reached its perfection in the Word made flesh. The act of love by which God reveals himself, united to the response of faith by humanity, generates a fruitful dialogue. Precisely for this reason, making our own in a certain sense the request of the disciples, "teach us to pray" (Lk 11:1), we can ask the Lord to help us to understand how to communicate with God and with other human beings through the marvelous communications media. In light of so decisive and definitive a communication, the media provide a providential opportunity to reach people everywhere, overcoming barriers of time, of space and of language; presenting the content of faith in the most varied ways imaginable; and offering to all who search the possibility of entering into dialogue with the mystery of God, revealed fully in Christ Jesus.

The Incarnate Word has left us an example of how to communicate with the Father and with humanity, whether in moments of silence and recollection, or in preaching in every place and in every way. He explains the Scriptures, expresses himself in parables, dialogues within the intimacy of the home, speaks in the squares, along the streets, on the shores of the lake and on the mountaintops. The personal encounter with him does not leave one indifferent, but stimulates imitation: "What I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops," (Mt 10:27).

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There is, however, a culminating moment in which communication becomes full communion: the Eucharistic encounter. By recognizing Jesus in the "breaking of the bread," (cf. Lk 24: 30-31), believers feel themselves urged on to announce his death and resurrection, and to become joyful and courageous witnesses of his Kingdom (cf. Lk 24:35).

6. Thanks to the Redemption, the communicative capacity of believers is healed and renewed. The encounter with Christ makes them new creatures, and permits them to become part of that people which he, dying on the Cross, has won through his blood, and introduces them into the intimate life of the Trinity, which is continuous and circular communication of perfect and infinite love among the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit.

Communication permeates the essential dimensions of the Church which is called to announce to all the joyful message of salvation. For this reason, the Church takes advantage of the opportunities offered by the communications media as pathways providentially given by God to intensify communion and to render more penetrating the proclamation of His word.[3] The media permit the manifestation of the universal character of the People of God, favoring a more intense and immediate exchange among local Churches, and nourishing mutual awareness and cooperation.

We give thanks to God for the presence of these powerful media which, if used by believers with the genius of faith and in docility to the light of the Holy Spirit, can facilitate the communication of the Gospel and render the bonds of communion among ecclesial communities more effective.

III. A Change of Mentality and Pastoral Renewal

7. In the communications media the Church finds a precious aid for spreading the Gospel and religious values, for promoting dialogue, ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation, and also for defending those solid principles which are indispensable for building a society which respects the dignity of the human person and is attentive to the common good. The Church willingly employs these media to furnish information about itself and to expand the boundaries of evangelization, of catechesis and of formation, considering their use as a response to the command of the Lord: "Go into the whole world and proclaim the gospel to every creature" (Mk 16:15).

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This is certainly not an easy mission in an age such as ours, in which there exists the conviction that the time of certainties is irretrievably past. Many people, in fact, believe that humanity must learn to live in a climate governed by an absence of meaning, by the provisional and by the fleeting.[4] In this context, the communications media can be used ?to proclaim the Gospel or to reduce it to silence within men?s hearts.?[5] This poses a serious challenge for believers, especially for parents, families and all those responsible for the formation of children and young people. Those individuals in the Church community particularly gifted with talent to work in the media should be encouraged with pastoral prudence and wisdom, so that they may become professionals capable of dialoguing with the vast world of the mass media.

8. The appreciation of the media is not reserved only to those already adept in the field, but to the entire Church Community. If, as has already been noted, the communications media take into account different aspects of the expression of faith, Christians must take into account the media culture in which they live: from the Liturgy, the fullest and fundamental expression of communication with God and with one another, to Catechesis, which cannot prescind from the fact of being directed to people immersed in the language and the culture of the day.

The current phenomenon of communications impels the Church towards a sort of pastoral and cultural revision, so as to deal adequately with the times in which we live. Pastors, above all, must assume this responsibility. Everything possible must be done so that the Gospel might permeate society, stimulating people to listen to and embrace its message.[6] Consecrated persons belonging to institutions having the charism of using the mass media have a particular responsibility in this regard. Spiritually and professionally formed towards this end, these institutions, ?should willingly lend their help, wherever pastorally appropriate [?] in order to offset the inappropriate use of the media and to promote higher quality programmes, the contents of which will be respectful of the moral law and rich in human and Christian values.?[7]

9. Such is the importance of the mass media that fifteen years ago I considered it inopportune to leave their use completely up to the initiatives of individuals or small groups, and suggested that they be decisively inserted into pastoral programs.[8] New technologies, in particular, create further opportunities for communication understood as a service to the pastoral government and organization of the different tasks of the Christian community. One clear example today is how the Internet not only provides resources for more information, but habituates persons to interactive communication.[9] Many Christians are already creatively using this instrument, exploring its potential to assist in the tasks of evangelization and education, as well as of internal communication, administration and governance. However, alongside the Internet, other new means of communication, as well as traditional ones, should be used. Daily and weekly newspapers, publications of all types, and Catholic television and radio still remain highly useful means within a complete panorama of Church communications.

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While the content being communicated must obviously be adapted to the needs of different groups, the goal must always be to make people aware of the ethical and moral dimension of the information.[10] In the same way, it is important to assure that media professionals receive the necessary formation and pastoral attention to confront the particular tensions and ethical dilemmas that arise in their daily work. Often these men and women ?sincerely desire to know and practice what is ethically and morally just,? and look to the Church for guidance and support.[11]

IV. The Mass Media, the Crossroads of the Great Social Questions

10. The Church, which in light of the message of salvation entrusted to it by the Lord is also a teacher of humanity, recognizes the duty to offer its own contribution for a better understanding of outlooks and responsibilities connected with current developments in communications. Especially because these influence the consciences of individuals, form their mentality and determine their view of things, it is important to stress in a forceful and clear way that the mass media constitute a patrimony to safeguard and promote. The communications media must enter into the framework of organically structured rights and duties, be it from the point of view of formation and ethical responsibility, or from reference to laws and institutional codes.

The positive development of the media at the service of the common good is a responsibility of each and every one.[12] Because of the close connections the media have with economics, politics and culture, there is required a management system capable of safeguarding the centrality and dignity of the person, the primacy of the family as the basic unit of society and the proper relationship among them.

11. We are faced with three fundamental options: formation, participation and dialogue.

In the first place, a vast work of formation is needed to assure that the mass media be known and used intelligently and appropriately. The new vocabulary they introduce into society modifies both learning processes and the quality of human relations, so that, without proper formation, these media run the risk of manipulating and heavily conditioning, rather than serving people. This is especially true for young people, who show a natural propensity towards technological innovations, and as such are in even greater need of education in the responsible and critical use of the media.

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In the second place, I would like to recall our attention to the subject of media access, and of co-responsible participation in their administration. If the communications media are a good destined for all humanity, then ever-new means must be found ? including recourse to opportune legislative measures ? to make possible a true participation in their management by all. The culture of co-responsibility must be nurtured.

Finally, there cannot be forgotten the great possibilities of mass media in promoting dialogue, becoming vehicles for reciprocal knowledge, of solidarity and of peace. They become a powerful resource for good if used to foster understanding between peoples; a destructive ?weapon? if used to foster injustice and conflicts. My venerable predecessor, Blessed John XXIII, already prophetically warned humanity of such potential risks in the Encyclical, *Pacem in Terris*.^[13]

12. The reflection upon the role ?of public opinion in the Church,? and ?of the Church in public opinion? aroused great interest. In a meeting with the editors of Catholic publications, my venerable predecessor, Pius XII, stated that something would be missing from the life of the Church were it not for public opinion. This same idea has since been repeated on other occasions^[14], and in the Code of Canon Law there is recognized, under certain conditions, the right to the expression of one?s own opinion.^[15] While it is true that the truths of the faith are not open to arbitrary interpretations, and that respect for the rights of others places intrinsic limits upon the expression of one?s judgments, it is no less true that there is still room among Catholics for an exchange of opinions in a dialogue which is respectful of justice and prudence.

Communication both within the Church community, and between the Church and the world at large, requires openness and a new approach towards facing questions regarding the world of media. This communication must tend towards a constructive dialogue, so as to promote a correctly-informed and discerning public opinion within the Christian community. The Church, like other institutions and groups, has the need and the right to make its activities known. However, when circumstances require, it must be able to guarantee an adequate confidentiality, without thereby prejudicing a timely and sufficient communication about Church events. This is one of the areas in which collaboration between the lay faithful and Pastors is most needed, as the Council appropriately emphasized, ?A great many wonderful things are to be hoped for from this familiar dialogue between the laity and their spiritual leaders: in the laity a strengthened sense of personal responsibility; a renewed enthusiasm; a more ready application of their talents to the projects of their spiritual leaders. The latter, on the other hand, aided by the experience of the laity, can more clearly and more incisively come to decisions regarding both spiritual and temporal matters. In this way, the whole Church, strengthened by each one of its members, may more effectively fulfill its mission for the life of the world?.^[16]

V. To Communicate with the Power of the Holy Spirit

13. The great challenge of our time for believers and for all people of good will is that of maintaining truthful and free communication which will help consolidate integral progress in the world. Everyone should know how to foster an attentive discernment and constant vigilance, developing a healthy critical capacity regarding the persuasive force of the communications media.

Also in this field, believers in Christ know that they can count upon the help of the Holy Spirit. Such help is all the more necessary when one considers how greatly the obstacles intrinsic to communication can be increased by ideologies, by the desire for profit or for power, and by rivalries and conflicts between individuals and groups, and also because of human weakness and social troubles. The modern technologies increase to a remarkable extent the speed, quantity and accessibility of communication, but they above all do not favor that delicate exchange which takes place between mind and mind, between heart and heart, and which should characterize any communication at the service of solidarity and love.

Throughout the history of salvation, Christ presents himself to us as the "communicator" of the Father: "God, in these last days, has spoken to us through his Son" (Heb 1:2). The eternal Word made flesh, in communicating Himself, always shows respect for those who listen, teaches understanding of their situation and needs, is moved to compassion for their suffering and to a resolute determination to say to them only what they need to hear without imposition or compromise, deceit or manipulation. Jesus teaches that communication is a moral act, "A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness, but an evil person brings forth evil out of a store of evil. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned." (Mt 12: 35-37)

14. The apostle Paul has a clear message for those engaged in communications (politicians, professional communicators, spectators), "Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another" No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear" (Eph 4: 25, 29).

To those working in communication, especially to believers involved in this important field of society, I extend the invitation which, from the beginning of my ministry as Pastor of the

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Universal Church, I have wished to express to the entire world "Do not be afraid!"

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" (1Cor 2:9).

To Mary, who gave us the Word of life, and who kept his unchanging words in her heart, do I entrust the journey of the Church in today's world. May the Blessed Virgin help us to communicate by every means the beauty and joy of life in Christ our Savior.

To all I give my Apostolic Blessing!

From the Vatican, 24 January 2005, the Feast of Saint Francis de Sales, Patron Saint of Journalists.

IOANNES PAULUS II

NOTES

[1] No. 1.

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[2] Apostolic Exhortation Evangelio Nuntiandi (December 8th, 1975): AAS 68 (1976), 45.

[3] Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation Christifideles Laici (December 30 th , 1988), 18-24: AAS 81 (1989), 421-435; cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instructive Ae tatis Novae (February 22 nd , 1992), 10: AAS 84 (1992), 454-455.

[4] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter Fides et Ratio (September 14 th , 1998), 91: AAS 91 (1999), 76-77.

[5] cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instructive Ae tatis Novae (February 22 nd , 1992), 4: AAS 84 (1992), 450.

[6] Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Pastores Gregis, 30: L'Osservatore Romano, October 17 th , 2003, p. 6.

[7] John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Vita Consecrata (March 25 th , 1996), 99: AAS 88 (1996), 476.

[8] Cf. John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, Redemptoris Missio (December 7 th , 1990), 37: AAS 83 (1991), 282-286.

[9] Cf. Pontifical Council for Social Communications, The Church and Internet (February 22 nd , 2002), 6: Vatican City, 2002, p. 13-15.

[10] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Inter Mirifica, 15-16; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instructional Communio et Progressio (May 23 rd , 1971), 107: AAS 63 (1971), 631-632; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instructional Aetatis Novae (February 22 nd , 1992), 18: AAS 84 (1992), 460.

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[11] Cf. Ibid., 19: l.c.

[12] Cf. The Catechism of the Catholic Church, num. 2494.

[13] Cf. John Paul II, Message for the 37 th World Communications Day (January 24 th , 2003): L'Osservatore Romano, January 25 th , 2003, p. 6.

[14] Cf. Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Lumen Gentium, 37; Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pastoral Instruction Communio et Progressio (May 23 rd , 1971), 114-117: AAS 63 (1971), 634-635.

[15] Can. 212, §3: According to the knowledge, competence, and prestige which they possess, they have the right and even at times the duty to manifest to the sacred pastors their opinion on matters which pertain to the good of the Church and to make their opinion known to the rest of the Christian faithful, without prejudice to the integrity of faith and morals, with reverence toward their pastors, and attentive to common advantage and the dignity of persons.

[16] Second Vatican Ecumenical Council, Lumen Gentium, 37.

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