

# COMMUNITY THROUGH FREE COMMUNICATION

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Since the end of Vatican II the Church has been observing the Sunday after the Feast of the Ascension as World Day of Social Communications, in order to draw the attention of all Christians to the fact that the mass media are truly gifts of God and as such should be made use of for the good of man not only as an individual but especially as a member of society. Hence the necessity of placing the media at the service of responsible human freedom, to ensure free and responsible communication resulting in the building up of a true community on both the civil and the family levels.

One of the many grave problems — philosophical, sociological, theological and pastoral — raised by the mass media themselves such as they have developed in our days concerns the need of placing these media at the service of man rather than subjecting man to the media; thus “man as such would not regress and be degraded in his humanity, but truly become a better person, more fully aware of his dignity and more responsible”.<sup>(1)</sup>

Such was, in fact, the principal aim of the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* issued in 1971 by the Pontifical Secretariate for the Means of Social Communications. “The Unity and Advancement of men living in society: these are the chief aims of social communication and of all the means it uses. . . . More than ever before, the way men live and think is profoundly affected by the means of social communication”.<sup>(2)</sup>

Freedom is man’s specific characteristic: he will make progress as man to the extent that he becomes more free, and he is more free when he can communicate with his fellow men without undermining his capacity for autodetermination. Of all man’s actions only the ones that are freely elicited are imputable to him: for these, in fact, he is responsible to the extent that he is free, that is insofar as they are truly his. When he is determined to act, or when his freedom is curtailed (e.g. by ignorance, fear or violence), he is less human in his activity and consequently less responsible for his actions.

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1. *Redemptor Hominis*, n. 15.
2. *Communio et Progressio*, n. 1.

What sort of influence have these mass media been exerting on man in recent times? If they have helped him to communicate with other fellow men as before, pulling down almost entirely the barriers of time and space, have they really made man more human, and therefore more free and responsible?<sup>(3)</sup>

The mass media, after emerging from the Gutenberg era through the intervention of the *printing press*, started reaching the masses around 1830 when the first modern vehicle of information was born: the *newspaper*. In 1895 the *cinema* was invented, becoming especially popular after 1920 when the first sound film was produced. Meanwhile the electronic media had come into their own through the invention of the *radio*, to explode in the 1950's with the *television* boom and in the late 1960's with the computerized telematic processes and global world-vision communications made possible through the satellites. How right was the philosopher of communications, Marshall McLuhan, when he referred to this world of ours as electronically recreated and turned into a "global village"!

Social communications media as we have them today affect practically all aspects of human life. Man's aspirations to freedom and his success or failure in achieving it in any high degree will be necessarily influenced by them. Hence "the importance and significance of the media will ultimately depend upon the working of man's free choice in their use".<sup>(4)</sup> And this applies to both communicator and recipient. Freedom of communication can be inhibited or impeded in many ways; state ownership, control by a political party, concentration of the media in a few hands, economic pressures, pressures from trade unions, and the like. One or more such factors affect the media almost everywhere, with the resulting infringement on the freedom of groups and individuals.<sup>(5)</sup>

These remarks lead us to the hot problem of manipulation, whose effects are all the more deleterious and lasting as it operates through the subconscious of persons and masses. The manipulatory powers of the media operate more or less irresponsibly on three levels: the supranational, the national and the private. On the supranational level we often see the media massively controlled by technologically overdeveloped countries or by their multi-national tentacles; these, after the fashion of a new type of imperialistic colonialism, often operate to the detriment of developing economies, and sometimes also of whole native cultures, for example in the Third World.<sup>(6)</sup>

3. Luigi Mistrorigo, "Media e Cultura", *Seminarium* 25 (April 1985) 168-177.

4. *Ibid.*, n. 13.

5. John Paul II's address on World Day of Communications 1981, *Osservatore Romano*, Engl. edition, 18 May 1981, p. 9.

6. Antoine de Tarlè, "Nouveaux Media: vers l'internalisation", *Études* (May 1986) 627-37.

On the national level the manipulators are often the governments themselves, when these in turn are not themselves manipulated by irrational pressures and ideologies; these often manipulate the formation of public opinion, by placing obstacles against and sometimes altogether impeding the free and balanced flow of truthful and integral information. This they do by restricting access to the sources of information, by excluding individuals and groups from the broadcasting media, by censoring and mutilating non-subservient contributions, by twisting truths or resorting to outright lies or exaggerations, and finally by constantly hammering on the same thing in a process of irresponsible brain-washing. The communists are masters of these techniques, but they are not alone.

On the private level manipulation is exercised more often than not through advertising. "If false assertions are made about the goods for sale, if less admirable human tendencies are exploited, those responsible for such advertising harm society and forfeit their credibility".<sup>(7)</sup> Furthermore, unremitting pressure to buy certain articles can create false needs that hurt both individuals and families, alienating them from what they really need. Such selling methods are base and immoral, for they not only threaten subconsciously the freedom of the individual, but are an affront to human dignity as well. The depersonalizing influence of the media, when the process of manipulation sets in, turns men into amorphous elements and peoples into masses, only capable to react passively without a mind of their own.

The Church, whose task is to prolong in history Christ's redeeming presence in the world and to make his salvation accessible to all men, cannot remain indifferent before the great opportunities offered by the means of social communication as well as before the harmful influences often resulting from them. While making use of the media in carrying out her pastoral and humanizing ministry in the world, the Church's task is also that of liberating man from intellectual slavery, from moral degradation and deceit, from ignorance and ruthless exploitation, all of which often finds its way to man through the media: the cinema, radio and television, the press.

From the individual we now turn to the family. To have a better world, it is not enough to have better and more responsible individuals. We need above all better families, and a family is more than an addition of individuals. What is the impact of the mass media on today's family? What are the immediate and the lasting effects of the social means of communication on the family? If such questions were ever relevant, they are certainly so today, when they are not only reaching the "masses", but have indeed penetrated into many millions of homes and have rendered accessible to the majority of

7. *Communio et Progressio*, n. 59.

mankind all that modern culture and technology have to offer in the way of information, educational aids and entertainment.

There can be no doubt that the mass media have greatly benefited the family and have rendered an immense service to the parents in their proper task as primary educators of their children. It is enough to think about the impact of films on children, of children's books of all sorts (comics, illustrated stories and science books, etc.), and most particularly of television in more recent years. These "marvellous instruments", as Vatican II has called them,<sup>(8)</sup> can be said to be in more ways than one complementary to what the children normally learn at school and in the home, providing as they do all sorts of information about every aspect of human life and about events actually taking place in every part of the world.

The recreation and entertainment which these media offer to the young and old alike are also important elements which, besides helping the families to remain united within the precincts of their own homes, must be taken into consideration when dealing with all-round psychological and moral information of youngsters.

While appreciating, however, the usefulness of the mass media and their contribution for the well-being and progress of the family, the parents have the duty of watching very closely, seeing to it that the use their children and they themselves make of the media, both in and outside the home, be not indiscriminate and uncontrolled, but guided by moderation and intelligence.

If this is not done, then the use of the media can well become an addiction instead of a good and useful habit. An indiscriminate watching of films and television programmes, and to some extent also an immoderate listening to songs and pop-music on radio and transistors tends to generate in the young a "passive" mentality; they will become used to being at the receiving end without any effort to act or to think creatively. Little by little the brain becomes "atrophied" for inactivity and lack of effort, especially in young people whose minds are still developing.

Hence, the need of choice between what should be watched or heard and what should not. And it is the parents' duty to help their children in this respect and to train them to make such choices, so that, when the parents are not around or when they themselves have become adults, the children may be ready to decide for themselves in a mature and responsible way.

Some of the products of the mass media (films, television programmes, comics and periodicals) carry no message at all and are absolutely useless, others are based on a wrong scale of values and gradually inject a materialistic and pagan view of life, others still are positively harmful portraying

8. *Inter Mirifica*, Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication, n. 1.

violence in crude detail and giving an idea of sex that is unworthy of man.

If properly used, on the other hand, and if the proper choice is made, the media can be powerful instruments for the teaching of authentic values, for presenting these values as truly attractive, for fostering love and justice and thus positively contributing to the unity of mankind and for peace between all races, nations and classes. It is only in this way that the media, instead of being exploited for the commercial, partisan or political interests of an individual or group, can serve as "social means of communication", that is as instruments which bring about union (com-union) through the mutual sharing of spiritual and moral goods in this global village of ours.

The mass media can be the family's worst enemy just as much as they can be its best friends. It all depends on how they are used by the members of the family and by the family as a unit. A stranger to London who judged the cinema by the posters he saw from the top of a double-decker, by film advertisements in the dailies and by what he read in the review columns, could be forgiven for concluding that the venal were conspiring with the mad to destroy the innocent and to poison the adult. If this is an exaggeration, the opinion that young people tend to imitate what they see is not far from the truth.<sup>(9)</sup>

That is why the Church is interested today more than ever in the means of social communication and considers it her duty and her God-given right to have free access to them as indispensable channels for her task of evangelization. By making adequate use of the mass media, especially radio and television, the Church can help to bring about love where there is hatred, union where there is separation, justice where there is injustice, truth where there is deceit and error. These are fundamental values for human life and indispensable elements in every education. By doing so, the Church would be following upon the steps of Christ, the Divine Communicator, thus becoming ever more a veritable community of God's children, a community of love.<sup>(10)</sup>

True, the trend in many countries of the world today seems to be in the opposite direction. But hope is one of the characteristics of the People of God, a people who believes in the Risen Christ and therefore also in man

9. Desmond Fisher, "Communications and Community", *Studies* 75 (Spring 1986) 74-85.

10. The theme of "community" and "communication" as applied to the Church has been a recurrent one in post-conciliar ecclesiology, having its theological foundation on collegiality and on the "body of Christ" notion. One of the most recent publications in this respect is: R. Kress, *The Church: Communion, Sacrament, Communication* (New York, Paulist Press, 1985); see also Walter Kasper, "Church as Communio", *Communio* 13 (Summer 1986) 100-117.

himself. Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the theologian of the mass media, was a man of hope, and his conception of an evolving universe animated by the “christic” element within it is also based on hope. The Church looks forward with hope and confidence like Teilhard, who once wrote: “I do not know *what* the future holds, but I do know *Who* holds the future”.