

Some characteristic marks of Communication Theology

By: Dr. Fr. Charles Ndhlovu

Fr. Charles Ndhlovu, PhD, studied and graduated with a Doctorate in Social Communication specializing in Communication Theology at the Pontifical University of Salesianum in Rome – Italy. Some of his publications can be found on his *website: charlesndhlovu.webpress.com*; he is also on *Youtube (Fr. Charles Ndhlovu – Mkhahirachiuta*. In this paper, he outlines and looks at some of the characteristic marks of Communication Theology.

There have been a good number of writers who have written on issues surrounding Communication Theology in general and its specific tenets. I have in mind names like Frances Plude, Fr. Eilers, Fr. Bonnot, and several other writers in that category. The main idea that surrounds and encapsulates Communication Theology is the fact that theology can be studied from a communication perspective. That Christian theology can be seen under the perspective of communication. It is the idea that communication is inherent in theology.

In this sense, communication becomes the eye through which Christian theology can be studied. Such studies have been done by different scholars and academicians, in which, they have demonstrated that there is a communication dimension in theology. This approach to studying theology has been done on the theological works of Martini and Karl Rahner to mention just a few. All this is based on a simple premise that the Christian God is a communicating God. One would never talk about God without talking about God's revelation and self-communication to the human person.

This is what we seek to further develop in this paper by choosing some of the characteristic marks which could help us to understand Communication Theology. As a preamble, we will do well to define in broad terms the three important words, communication, theology and communication theology. This background will help us to better understand the thematic approach towards Communication theology.

The word communication in general terms is a fashionable word. It is so fashionable in the sense that it encompasses a lot of things, which is why the dictionary of the Sciences of Social Communication of the Pontifical University of Salesianum looks at communication as being broad – to an extent that someone can say that everything is communication – *tutto è comunicazione*. Nevertheless, the generally agreed upon descriptive definition is that

communication is the transfer of information from the sender to the recipient. It is a descriptive definition in the sense that one would hardly give an all-encompassing definition because of the many types, approaches, theories and many models of communication. If we look at communication in this way, the danger is that it looks very linear – as if all that matters is the sender on one side and the recipient on the other side but so many factors come into play in the process of communication like noise, medium, effect, feedback, participation, dialogue, rituals, and comprehension among others. All these issues characterize the process of communication.

Communication is not only about the intrapersonal dimension, which would be described as monologue but it would also be described as interpersonal and group communication which involves many people. Communication looked at in this way can be described as being categorized according to the number of those involved in the communication process. But communication is also a process. It is a process which involves the movement of information from one source to the recipient. The sender sends a message which the recipient decodes. So there is a process of encoding and decoding. It is at this point that one would easily think of the Lasswelian model in which there is the sender, the message, the medium, the recipient, the effect and we should add feedback. This is a process in communication. But communication is also semiotic. One uses signs and symbols to communicate. The challenge is whether signs and symbols are used in the same way and whether indeed a sign that one uses is known by the other person and if known, whether it is interpreted in the same way. This is the danger of using signs and symbols in communication. There is always room for misinterpretation. Nevertheless, the community usually comes to some agreement about signs and how they should be interpreted in the community. For example, the colours of the robots are interpreted in a specific way. Red may mean do not pass or stop, and green may mean move on. These are generally agreed upon signs and their interpretation. Another sign would be wearing red on valentine day – it symbolizes love but the same colours worn at the Eucharistic celebration mean completely something different – here it refers to martyrdom. This means that the context matters in the process of communication. The context must be such that there should be common ground between the sender and the recipient otherwise communication becomes abstract and inapplicable. All this however finds more meaning in ritual communication which is broader, more cultural in which there are several networks of codes, words, symbols, images, carvings, art, dress code, scripture, writings, stories, folks and legends. This is much richer and broader

communication. This is semiotic communication. In a nutshell and really in a summary form this is how one would look at communication. But caution should be taken because communication is much broader and we would need to go really bulky in order to adequately describe or define it.

Theology on the other hand is the context in which we, Communication Theologians, place communication and seek to explore how it is inherent in theology. Theology is usually defined as the study of God. It is how God has revealed himself to the human being and how the human person has responded to that call and invitation. Over the centuries there have been several theologians who have generally explored how God has revealed himself in history and to people of different ages. It is interested to explore how God has revealed himself through different means and ways and that finally God has revealed himself through Jesus Christ. In this sense, Jesus is the fullness of revelation and Jesus is the fullness of God's self-communication to the human person because he is both the medium and the message but also because in Jesus is revealed everything that God would have wanted to reveal to the human person. After revelation through Jesus there is no other major revelation – with other revelations normally supporting what has already been revealed through Jesus, the God made man.

Having looked at communication and theology, we can now venture into understanding Communication Theology and bring out some of its characteristic marks. Communication Theology is not just communication and is not just theology. It is a way of understanding theology from a communicational perspective. Communication becomes the eye through which Christian Theology can be seen or studied. One looks at how different communicational themes find expression in theology. The basis of communication theology is not abstract. It draws inspiration from the fact that the Christian God is a communicating God and this is the case because God has throughout the centuries allowed himself to be known by the human person. The history of salvation is basically a history of revelation. It is a history of the economy of salvation – the history of God's self-communication to the human being. It is a history of how God has communicated himself to the human person. Christian theology is communicational – communication of God, through different ways, namely prophets, different personalities like our ancestors Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, all through God's revelation through different kings and Israelite leaders, and through Jesus Christ, the apostles and the letters and through the symbolism and eschatological imagery of revelation. This is communication – communication of a

communicating God. Our God who did not want to remain hidden but wanted to be known, known in order to be worshipped, worshipped in order to be served, served so that the human being can be saved. The human person is called to a communicating and dialoging relationship and communion with God in this life and finally in the life to come – in the beatific vision. This communion, oneness, and movement of the human person in love towards heaven characterized the communication between God and man. That is why we believe that there are some characteristic marks which we can look at which characterize the communication between God and the human person.

Communication Theology in my view ought to bring to the fore, the importance of contextualization, acculturation and/or inculturation. This is very much in line with the theory of McLuhan, namely, that the medium is the message. This aphorism emphasizes the fact that the medium is an important aspect of communication. That is why the Lasswelian model of “who sends, sends what, through what medium, to whom and with what effect” emphasizes and names the “medium” as an important aspect of communication. The same applies to Communication Theology where the medium is important for the right understanding of the message. The carrier of the message or the channel through which it is transmitted is an important aspect of communication. That is why, Jesus is the medium. God after sending all the prophets and still not getting the desired effect, in the fullness of time, decided to send his son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the medium of God’s message. He is the mediator. Jesus mediates between God and the human person. He is the perfect mediator and perfect medium because of his incarnation. He is a perfect medium because he became one of us. He is the absolute medium because he is a perfect symbol that could be understood by the human person. If God had used angels or some spiritual medium not tangible to the human person, we would never have understood him or her. In my culture, when one sees a ghost, they run away. But God decided to save us through an embodied medium. Jesus had/has a body like us. We saw him. He spoke our language. He cried and laughed. He died as we all will die. He was like us in everything except sin. God got it point on! The medium was right!

Jesus was a complete symbol and a perfect medium because he was not only a channel like some metal or like a pipe or a transmitter or something lifeless that simply transfers information from one point to another. Jesus is the message – because to have seen him is to have seen the Father. To the disciple who wanted to follow him; he did not say come and listen

but come and see. To see Jesus is to see God, the Father. To see Jesus is a message in itself about the mystery of God. All that he did, all the places that he visited, all the stories and parables he shared, his way of touching people, his visits to sinners, the places where he slept and the manner of conducting himself was all communicational and meaningful. There was non-verbal communication all around Jesus. Just seeing him emitted non-verbal communication. But his preaching, words and in general his verbal communication was big and rich message. In the McLuhanian understanding, the medium is indeed the message.

This message was given in the right manner, in the right places, in the mountains, on the sea shores, in the temple, on the lakeside, in the market place, in places where people tended their flock and in people's houses. The context was right and that is why Jesus was able to gather around him many people; at times up to five thousand! All this because the context was right. At funerals, he preached about death, like at the tomb side of Lazarus; in the agricultural areas, he would talk about parables of the sower, in the seaside, he would talk about nets and at the last supper he would talk about the Eucharist – do this in memory of me. He would prepare his disciples for the future – the Holy Spirit, the advocate will come. Then after resurrection, he got it point on again; go and preach the gospel to the ends of the earth and remember I am with you to the close of the age. The message of Jesus corresponded to the times and responded to the need of the time, transporting that context into the future so that such situations would have long standing answers through scripture.

Additionally, Jesus' message was well acculturated and inculturated. It was a message that scratched where it was really itching. It was a message that was well positioned and placed into the culture of the people. He used images, concepts, words and expressions that belonged to the culture of the people. He used words that were used in the life of the people, like the sower, fishing, nets, barns, wheat, and many other expressions that were used locally and culturally. Communication Theology searches in scripture, tradition and in revelation, how God through Jesus has presented himself and his message in an inculturated way. Special mention here can be made of the African synod convened in Rome in 1994 in which the Bishops agreed on the value and importance of inculturating the Christian message so that the people of Africa can fully live the gospel values in their lives. All this is a response and continuation of what God, through Jesus Christ did; he availed himself and communicated himself to the human person in a comprehensible manner – so that the human person can in the paraphrased words of Pope

Benedict XVI – become aware and feel it that they are called to full life in God, that is, to share in the life of the Holy Trinity. The human person through inculturated symbols and images is called as Pope St. John Paul II exhorted us; *to repent and believe in the good news*. This theological communication of using symbols and images has again been highlighted by Pope Francis with his metaphorical communication, for example, Pope Francis said; *pastors should have the odour of the sheep* or that *the Church should be a mother*. All these are metaphorical and contextual expressions which highlight the importance of inculturation and acculturation as an important aspect and theme of Communication Theology.

Sacramental theology is also the context for Communication Theology. The sacraments and sacramentals are symbols. We can thus say that symbols are an important element of Communication theology – and this can be referred to as symbolic communication. Scripture and theology in general uses a lot of symbols. The symbols are of different grades. Some are symbols of lower level as compared to the complete and perfect symbol of Jesus. Jesus is a complete symbol above all other symbols because he is the God made man. He reveals God, he is the word of God. He is the verbum. He makes God present. He has lived with God. He knows God and he has come to share God's life with the human person. He is the perfect mediator because he is the closest we can ever experience about God and yet he has also experienced what it means to be frail and to be human. He is a perfect symbol of the father.

Images and concepts are also important in Communication Theology. God has communicated himself to the human person through images and concepts. The book of revelation has a lot of images and so many concepts. Conceptual mapping is an important element in theology in which there is cross-mapping from one complicated idea to an image or concept that can easily be understood by the human person. For example, there is cross mapping of concepts in Jesus' use of parables. There is cross mapping between God as the creator to the simple concept of a sower who sows seeds. There is also cross mapping of concepts between the punishment that will be in hell to a concept of the heat of fire. Conceptual mapping is important because one moves from a complicated idea to a simple concept. The simple concept becomes the medium through which the complicated idea can be understood. The mysteries of God are understood through concepts and images. The concepts and images in a way simplify the complicated ideas. The creator role of God is mysterious but it can be understood in the context of the sower. God's creation created *ex-nihil* can be understood through the image of seeds that

are sown and then germinate. While the role of the devil in destroying creation and bringing confusion in the world can be understood with the simple image of someone who sows other seeds in the garden. All this is imagery. All these are concepts. These concepts are based on cross mapping of reality. This is an important theme in Communication Theology.

Communication Theology would also look at the sender and recipient in the communication process. If we look at this from a theological perspective, we would be thinking about God as the initiator of the communication process. God as the creator created the world. He was concerned about the spiritual welfare of the human person and that is why he sent different prophets and patriarchs, kings and different personalities to convey his message to the human person. In the fullness of time, God sent his only begotten Son, Jesus to come on earth and meet the human person in his context. God is the sender. He is the sender of the human communicators but he is also the sender of the message. He is the one who encodes. But then there is also someone who decodes. This is the human person. He is the recipient of God's communication. God comes to meet the human person. He is a God who makes the first move. The human person is the recipient in this process – not a passive recipient but he is an active recipient because he is free to accept or to refuse the message. God's offer to the human person is not forced but free.

This brings us to another element of Communication Theology, namely, the importance of freedom and responsibility in the communication process. The human person is absolutely free to refuse or to accept God's self-communication and God is absolutely free to reveal himself to the human person or not. The human person is not forced. God is not forced. Any communication that lacks freedom is just a caricature! True communication and genuine communication is free. Scripture appeals to the human person's freedom to accept the message of God but it is never forced on anyone. No one receives the word of God under threat. Christian theology and God's message is given freely, accepted freely and rejected freely but with eternal consequences for one's response.

All this would be meaningless if we did not look at the effect of the communication process between God and the human person. What effect does it bring? This effect can be given in the form of feedback. What is the feedback that is given? Does the feedback show that the message was received? Does the feedback show that the message was understood? Does the feedback show affirmation or rejection? If it is affirmative then there is correspondence between

what the sender wants and what the recipient wants. It is not always that there will be such correspondence. At times, the message may be well understood but it may be rejected! This happens and has been the case all through salvation history when the Israelites refused God's suggestions and commandments. This happens even in our daily life. Sometimes we send the message correctly, and we may keep laboring sending the same message but it could be that the message and our request has been rejected. Communication has still taken place but it's just not in the affirmative. Communication Theology then looks at why the message has been rejected, what else could have been done so that in the future new persons, probably the communication dimension could end up in the affirmative. That is what God did with the Israelites in the desert, they refused to obey, he left them in their stubbornness and got the obedience and acceptance from the Babylonian group who were willing to return home to Canaan.

We would do well as well to look at another characteristic mark of communication, namely, the fact that it is intrapersonal, interpersonal and group communication. The communication between God and the human person does not always happen in the context of communal prayer as we see in Israelite history but it is also personal. God is able to communicate within himself in Trinitarian intra-communication. This is the communication that takes place between the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, three persons in one God; one God but three persons. In the Trinity there is total and perfect communication, there is interaction and unity. The Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit communicate within themselves to an extent that the Father could create, the Son would save and the Holy Spirit would sanctify. All this was done in unity and full knowledge of the other. The Father would communicate with the Son and the Son would reveal the Holy Spirit. This is communication and it is intrapersonal communication within God himself. But God has also revealed himself through interpersonal communication with great patriarchs Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. He spoke to them personally in dialogue and advised them on what to do. God also communicated in group communication with the Israelites. He addressed them at different points of their salvation history telling them what to do and how to do it. This is an important aspect of Communication Theology, namely, the dimension of intrapersonal, interpersonal and group communication.

Really this is an important aspect in theology. If we fish out from theology this dimension of intrapersonal, interpersonal and group communication passages from scripture, tradition and revelation in general, we will have taken off a big chunk – probably that is why

some have gone as far as saying; everything is communication – *tutto è comunicazione*. A pillar or a wall communicates a message of the skill of the builder or the painter, a book communicates the ideas of the writer, a car communicates the ideas of the maker, the universe – land and water and the skies communicate the idea of God the creator, all creatures communicate the designs of God, all that the human person makes communicate the creativity of the human person and his conception of reality – the human person as a co-creator only shares in God’s creative work. He or she only participates in God’s idea of how the world should be and function. As such, all that is, is a communication of God’s wish for the world. Even evil that is done, is a communication of what the evil doer intends things to be like. Existential experiences and categories communicate as well. This is what we basically study in theodicy that creation is an imprint of God – that in creation, we find the footprints of God. The magnificence of creation is a revelation of the creating and communicating God. Probably that is why some philosophers agree that cause causes it’s like.

The processual element of communication is another important ingredient in Communication Theology. God does not communicate in a vacuum. God communicates in the process of communication, in which there is not only the sender but there is also the recipient and there is the medium, the effect and feedback. This is a complete process. We find this process realized in the bible; where God calls the human person through mediation of Jesus. The human person gives feedback and there is an effect which is life everlasting or damnation. This is a complete process which begins from God to the human person and then back to God again. The completeness of this process is what moves some of us to affirm that God is the perfect and principal communicator. He does not leave the communication process in the balance but helps the human person to respond and not only to respond but also to realize that there are eternal consequences for the response that is given. It is a process that begins with God himself and then leads to the human response but all this does not exclude the importance of feedback and response. The process through which God communicates to the human person is a complete process and the human person responds completely as we have said elsewhere – all this is done in freedom because the human person has freedom for free determination and this does not crush with the doctrine of predestination at all. The doctrine of predestination basically stipulates that the human person is predestined for salvation, and to achieve this objective God has given through Jesus Christ, graces to help the human person to choose properly but in freedom the

human person at times makes the mistake of choosing evil but God cannot control the human person like a robot. He leaves him or her free, totally free, to determine his or her final destination while explaining, availing and putting at his or her disposal everything that he or she needs to know or do in order to be saved. God has given His Son Jesus Christ, the sacraments, the sacramentals, the scripture, tradition and prophets – all of them meant to help the human person to choose well and rightly. But the greatness of God is in creating a human being that is free to accept him or reject him. For some of us, we would easily have decided to remote control the human being so that he loves, and accepts salvation like a machine but that's not God's way of doing things. He created the human person and left him and her free. Free to decide, free to choose, free in his self-determination, free to say yes or say no; that is what God did. If man abuses this freedom and does not use it responsibly, there are eternal consequences, namely, eternal punishment in heaven but proper and responsible use of freedom will lead to paradisiacal joys and enjoyment.

Communication Theology, conclusively deals with the fact that God is a communicating God. This is the basis of Communication Theology, namely, that God has communicated himself through several means in order to convince the human person to accept God's offer of salvation. The human person on his part has responded affirmatively and negatively. In both cases, communication has taken place – resulting in damnation or paradise. In a nutshell, these are some of the important characteristic marks of Communication Theology.