

World Communication Day Messages since 1967: A Theological Assessment

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1. Introduction

Following the suggestion of the Council Fathers of the Vatican II, expressed in the Decree “*Inter Mirifica*” on the means of social communication, the “World Communication Day” was instituted. According to No. 18 of this document, “a day is to be set aside each year in every diocese... on which the faithful will be reminded of their duties” in the field of social communication. They are to be asked to pray for the Church’s mission in this field and to financially support and contribute to it.

Beginning on May 7, 1967 the first world day of communication was celebrated and since then, it has become a regular event. Each time the Pope publishes a message on this occasion which treats a theme that he chooses for that year. The messages of the World Communication Day’s show a broad range of different issues which are to be addressed regarding social communication:

- There are basic aspects related to human beings and the world such as “Unity of Mankind” (1971) or “Solidarity and Fraternity between Peoples and Nations” (1988), “Understanding among Peoples” (2005), “Service at the Truth” (1972), “Reconciliation” (1976), “Fundamental Rights and Duties of Man” (1977), “Human Freedom” (1981), “Justice and Peace” (1983, 1987, 2003), “Progress of Human Family” (1991), “Communication, Communion and Cooperation” (2006), etc.
- Themes which are related to family, children and the youth have often appeared in one and other context (1969, 1970, 1979, 1980, 1985, 2004, and 2007).
- Special issues such as “Advertising” (1977), “Recipients” (1978), “the Elderly” (1982), “Women” (1996), “New Relationship” (2009) are also addressed.
- Topics especially related to religious or spiritual aspects are present (1973, 1989, 1998, 2000, and 2012). Messages dealing with culture are also given in 1984, 1990, and 2013 (not yet published).
- Other messages which deal with the relation between Church’s communication and Social communication are the messages in 1967, 1974, 1986, 1989, 1990, 1992, 1997, 2002, and 2010).

Basically, all these messages have practical characters which aim at directing and inviting individuals, professionals and institutions to reflect and to act in social communications. They should be aware of the goal and the end of social communications, namely to promote human life and to improve human society. Especially, Church’s organizations, institutions and Christian

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communicators should spread the values of the Gospel in all communicative activities in the Church and in different areas of social communication. Through the World Communication Day's messages the Church positively shows her attitude towards the development of social communication. She presents some practical approaches to that development. At the same time, she also gives warnings about possible dangers.

2. Theological Aspects in the Messages of World Communication Day

2.1. From the perspective of “Inter Mirifica” and “Communio et Progressio”

As we know, the World Communication Day is the fruit of the Vatican II decree “*Inter Mirifica*” on the means of social communication. The document “*Inter Mirifica*” did not develop any theological concept related to social communication. In the doctrinal part, this document emphasizes only general aspects related to social communication as follows:

- The Church has to communicate the Gospel and to teach men how to use the means of social communication properly.
- The Church has the right “to use and own any of these media which are necessary or useful for the formation of Christians and for pastoral activity.”²
- In accordance with Christian values, the Church pleads for observance of the moral order in social communications.³ Then, she gives some general statements regarding information, the rights of art, and the moral law, public opinion, professionals and recipients in social communications. Further, she calls for the responsibility of civil authorities for observing the common good.⁴

From this background, we do not see any theological proposition that grounds Church's statements on social communications. It seems that the Council fathers focus their discussions mainly on practical and pastoral aspects.

In this context, it is considerable to mention the Pastoral Instruction “*Communio et Progressio*”. It is the result of a proposal of the Second Vatican Council. Originally, the document proposed for discussion on the means of social communication was long. The Council fathers came to the resolution that the original 114 items should be reduced to the essential. A Pastoral Instruction could be issued later that should go into details. For this reason, we have the Pastoral Instruction “*Communio et Progressio*” prepared and published by the “Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communication”. This document, considered in theological perspective, has pointed out some elements for further theological reflection and development⁵: communication under

² IM No. 3.

³ IM No. 4.

⁴ IM Nos. 5-11.

⁵ CeP Nos 6-15.

Trinitarian dimension, the role of the Holy Spirit, Christ as the perfect communicator, communication leads to communion.

Perhaps, from this background and also because of practical orientation to the audience, there is explicitly no theological concept related to social communication that is formulated in the messages of World Day of Communication. However, there are implicitly some theological pointers within them when the Popes address certain issue chosen for each event.

2.2. Some Theological Aspects

Franz-Josef Eilers makes a distinction between three approaches to theology and communication⁶:

1. *Theology of communication* which sees the means of social communication as gift of God. The Church has to use them as instruments to preach the Gospel.
2. *Communicative theology* which tries to present and teach theology in such a way that it can be intelligible to simple people. In this perspective, theologian should use words, expressions and concepts of people of today to preach and explain the message of God so that common and modern people can understand it.
3. *Communication theology* is a new theological concept that slowly evolves after Second Vatican Council. This concept of theology considers the whole of theology under communication perspective. Based on the self-communication of God, communication becomes “a theological principle in itself.”

Using this distinction as a frame work, I try to work out some theological aspects that could be found from the messages of World Communication Day.

In the message of the first World Communication Day, the Pope generally shows the relation of the Church and social communication. As member of the human family the Church intimately shares the life with humanity and its history. She is aware of “the vast and complex phenomenon of the modern means of social communication”.⁷ She re-affirms the attitude of the Church towards them which is shown in other Church’s document like “*Miranda Prorsus*” (No. 1), “*Inter Mirifica*” (No. 1), “*Communio et Progressio*” (No. 2), when she considers the modern means of social communication as “wonderful techniques”, realized in “a wonderful plan of God’s providence”.⁸

The Church also must give full credit to the contribution of the means of social communication “to the enrichment of culture, to the spread of various artistic forms, to recreation, to mutual

⁶ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Communicating in Ministry and Mission: An Introduction to Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication*, 3rd ed. (Manila: Logos [Divine Word] Publications, Inc., 2009), 19-21.

⁷ Franz-Josef Eilers, *Church and Social Communication: Basic Documents*, 2nd ed. (Manila: Logos [Divine Word] Publications, Inc., 1997), 215.

⁸ Ibid.

knowledge and understanding among peoples and also towards the spread of the Gospel messages.”⁹ Here, we can see a kind of theology of communication which positively values modern means of social communication by their contribution to human life and society. This line of theology appears again and again in other World Communication Day messages following up this first message. Some examples will be presented follows:

- The Church recognizes a new structure of society with new patterns of human relations. She, therefore, encourages Church’s members to fulfill the task of evangelization “in all the ways and by all the means which are available to her to use as she abides among the people of each continent.”¹⁰
- As Videocassettes and Audiocassettes numerously spread in the market, they were considered as “new resource” and a “powerful potential for helping individuals to develop culturally, socially, and in the religious sphere. Therefore, “they can be of great service in transmitting the faith” along personal witnesses and contacts.¹¹
- In the time of the Internet, the Church realizes a new dimension of social communication. It is seen as a “New Forum” compared with the ancient *Forum Romanum*, “where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own.” However, these multi-forms of social communication are no longer constrained to a local, to a country. There are no more frontiers in the Net. Social communication has now a global dimension which is characterized by pluralism, multi-religious encounter, transnational and international communication. In this context, “the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message.”¹²

Not only recognizing the importance of the contribution of the means of social communication to human life and society, the Church also gives her attention to the new context which human communications have created. She is always aware of the changes and challenges in communicating the faith in that context. In the course of her history and mission, the Church has used all the means of social communication at her disposal to preach the Gospel, but she also has searched and developed methods to communicate Christ to peoples of all nations and cultures, using their

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ “*Social Communications and Evangelization in Today’s World*”, Message on the 8th World Communication Day, 1974.

¹¹ “*Videocassettes and Audiocassettes in the Formation of Culture and Conscience*”, Message on the 27th World Communication Day, 1993.

¹² “*Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*”, Message on the 36th World Communication Day, 2002.

languages, cultural heritages, adapting their patterns of thought. This attitude comes from a concept of communicative theology, discussed above. The Popes have often addressed this issues in several messages on World Communication Day.

- Facing the modern world, Pope Paul VI underlined the need of Church's engagement in matters of modern development. Christian communicators should be "always there among the currents of human search, idea, debate and exchange" in order to make "contribution, the contribution of a Christian leaven, a Christian influence within."¹³ In addition, there is the search for new and improved methods of apostolate which apply modern instruments of social communication.
- In order to affirm and to promote spiritual values in modern development, the Church encourages communicators to tell the stories of the sacrifice and dedication in concrete expression.¹⁴
- She calls communicator's attention to the present culture.¹⁵
- She pleads for efforts that search to adapt the divine message to people's way of talking and their patterns of thought.¹⁶
- With new forms and in new structures of social communication, Pope John Paul II called for attention to authentic human needs, "especially those of the weak, the vulnerable and the marginalized. Communications can be "an implicit proclamation of the Lord. However, besides implicit proclamation, Christian communicators should also seek out ways to speak explicitly of Jesus crucified and risen, of his triumph over sin and death, in a manner suited to the medium used and to the capacities of audiences."¹⁷ Similarly, Pope Benedict XVI emphasizes that a fruitful evangelization requires attention to and understanding of culture and customs of the peoples. In this way, the truth of the gospel may touch their heart and mind. The technologies serve to gain a profound knowledge of our world.¹⁸

According to the Church's view, social communication, including the use of the means and ways, should lead peoples to unity and improve human society.¹⁹ The document "*Communio et Progressio*" explains that "social communications tend to multiply contacts within society and to

¹³ "*Social Communications and Evangelization in Today's World*", Message on 8th World Communication Day, 1974.

¹⁴ "*The Mass Media and the Affirmation and Promotion of Spiritual Values*", Message on 7th World Communication Day, 1973.

¹⁵ "*The Christian Message in a Computer Culture*", Message on 24th World Communication Day, 1990.

¹⁶ "*The Proclamation of Christ's Message in the Communication Media*", Message on 26th World Communication Day, 1992.

¹⁷ "*Proclaiming Christ in the Media at the Dawn of the New Millennium*", Message on 33rd World Communication Day, 2000.

¹⁸ "*New Technologies, New Relationships. Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*", Message on 43rd World Communication Day, 2009.

¹⁹ Cf. CeP No. 1.

deepen social consciousness.”²⁰ The Church also envisions the same goal in communication with other peoples. However, she believes that all social communications have “their source and model in the central mystery of the eternal communication between the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit who live a single divine life.”²¹ Christ the “perfect communicator” is the model for Christian communication, because in his life and through his life “communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotion,” the deep dimension of social communication lies in “giving-self-in-love”.²² Being incorporated in Jesus Christ, Christian communicators are moved and enabled by his Holy Spirit “who brings all men together in unity.”²³ These theological aspects appear in all the messages of World Communication Day. Sometimes, to certain particular issues, they are reflected more deeply and carefully.

- Regarding the bond of humanity, Christian communication is based on the belief that the unity of human beings “has its roots in a shared divine sonship. The beginning and end of all supreme values, the living God is also their guarantee.”²⁴ Christ’s communication with the Father and with humanity brings about unity.²⁵
- In all communicative activities of the Church, Christian communication tends to protect the dignity of the human person, justice, universal brotherhood, and to spread “values which make it easier for a man to understand his own true vocation and which at the same time open the way to a constructive dialogue with others and to union with God.”²⁶ In the mystery of the Word Incarnate the Church recognizes “the criterion on which the estimate of man’s supreme value is based.”²⁷
- Especially, before the Holy Year 2000, we can find some important theological elements related to communication in the three messages of World Communication Day in 1997, 1998, and 1999: Christ as the “way” is the divine “*medium*” leading to God and to others; God communicates his eternal truth; God communicates himself to us “not only in the created world but also through Sacred Scriptures, and especially in and through his Son, Jesus Christ, the Word made flesh; and the ‘life’ of Christ is the life of grace, ... which is a

²⁰ CeP No. 8.

²¹ Ibid.

²² CeP No. 11.

²³ CeP No. 13.

²⁴ “*Social Communications and the Development of Nations*”, Message on the 2nd World Communication Day, 1968.

²⁵ “*Social Communications at the Service of the Unity of Mankind*”, Message on the 5th World Communication Day, 1971.

²⁶ “*Social Communications and Evangelization in Today’s World*”, Message on the 8th World Communication Day, 1974.

²⁷ “*Social Communications and the Fundamental Rights and Duties of Man*”, Message on the 10th World Communication Day, 1976.

created share in his own life and which enables us to live forever in his love.”²⁸ In communicative life with God, namely in contemplative prayer, Christian communicators will be enabled by the Holy Spirit to present the message of hope to women and men of modern time.²⁹ Christian communication will contribute to humanity as Christian communicators go with women and men of the time in their searching for God. At the same time it contributes to human communication as it creates a culture of remembrance supportive to the culture of transitory “news”, a culture of wisdom to the culture of information, a culture of joy to the culture of entertainment of media. In this way, Christian communication leads to the encounter with God.³⁰

- In the light of the Christian faith, new relationships created by modern means of social communication are not a response to technologies. “This desire for communication and friendship is rooted in our very nature as human beings... we are responding to God’s call – a call that is imprinted in our nature as being created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion.”³¹ From him, we learn to create and communicate a culture of friendship, respect and dialogue.
- If Christian communicators attempt to spread the Word effectively, they must learn to become silent in contemplation with God and God’s Word. “We need that silence which becomes contemplation, which introduces us into God’s silence and brings us to the point where the Word, the redeeming Word, is born.”³² Here, it is important for the communicator to see silence as necessary part of communication, as communication with God, as living communicatively with him in communion. All communications of the Church live by this communion. The Church’s mystery comes properly from the eternal Word God has prepared in silence and communicated to humanity.

3. Conclusion

The pontifical messages on the World Communication Day are geared towards institutions, organizations and individual persons who concern themselves with social communication, especially professionals and Church’s members who are engaged in different sections of social communications. The messages express the intention of the Church in relation to social communication. Generally, the Popes attempt to make people aware of the benefits and

²⁸ “*Communicating Jesus: The Way, the Truth, and the Life*”, Message on the 30th World Communication Day, 1997.

²⁹ “*Sustained by the Spirit, Communicate Hope*”, Message on the 31st World Communication Day, 1998.

³⁰ “*Mass Media: a Friendly Companion for those in Search of the Father*”, Message on the 32nd World Communication Day, 1999.

³¹ “*New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*”, Message on the 43rd World Communication Day, 2009.

³² “*Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization*”, Message on the 46th World Communication Day, 2012.

disadvantages of the use of the means of social communication. Thereby, they present also problems and challenges caused by modern communications.

The messages of the Popes are grounded in theological reflections based on God's communication in his revelation, in the Incarnation, and in the Church. These theological considerations can be traced back to basic Church's documents as well as some pontifical teachings like documents of the Second Vatican Council "*Dei Verbum*", "*Lumen Gentium*", "*Gaudium et Spes*", "*Ad Gentes*"; other Pope's documents like "*Ecclesiam Suam*", "*Evangelii Nuntiandi*" (Paul VI), "*Dominum Vivificantem*", "*Redemptoris Missio*" (John Paul II), "*Verbum Domini*". Among Church's documents related to Social Communication, the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication "*Communio et Progressio*" delineates basic elements for a theological concept under the perspective of communication.

Because of the practical character of the messages of World Communication Day one may not find explicitly theological aspects presented in the messages. However, from the background of "*Communio et Progressio*" the theological elements related to social communication are also discussed as foundation for Church's statements. The keynotes are modern development in social communication is considered under divine providence. The means are "gifts of God" for comforting human life and improving human society. Within this development the Church has to be vigilant to potential dangers, to the problems and challenges of new situation of social communication in human society. At the same time, she has to learn how to keep pace with modern society and to find proper ways for communicating faith in the new context. God's communication gives criteria for dealing with problems and challenges in modern development of social communication. The human person as being created in the image and likeness of God, and the whole humanity will be lead to communion with God and among themselves through communication. This is the end of Christian communication.

From the perspective of the pontifical messages of the World Communication Day, it is important to recognize the potential of the modern means of social communication in their contribution to human communication. It is necessary to look at the new situation regarding human communication in modern society. For this reason, there is a need to comprehend the phenomena caused by modern social communications. This essentially calls Christian communicators to analyze those phenomena in order to work out criteria and concepts that lead to meaningful communication among human beings. In all communicative efforts, Christian communication always focuses on the dignity of the human person as being created in the image and likeness of God and especially, therefore, on the Christian God who is a communicating God, who in his self-communication shows the way of communicating that leads to a full understanding of human being and to encounter with Him.

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