



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 23rd WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Religion in the Mass Media"

[Sunday, 7 May 1989] *Brothers and sisters,*

my dear friends the communicators, 1. The theme of the World Day of Social Communications this year, "Religion in the Media", underlines the special importance of the Church's presence and of the part it plays in public dialogue. In our days, in fact, religious messages, as well as cultural messages, gain an increased impact from the intervention of the social communications media. The reflection which I would like to share with you on this occasion will illustrate a concern that has been constantly with me throughout my pontificate: what place can religion have in the life of society and, more exactly, what place can religion have in the media?² In the course of its pastoral activity, the Church naturally asks itself questions regarding the media's attitude to "religion". The fact is that at the very time the media and the techniques of communication are enjoying such developments, the industrial world which has assisted their extraordinary growth itself shows a "secularism" which is apparently bent on hastening the disappearance of any sense of religion among the people of our day.³ Meanwhile, it is plain to see that religious information is tending to get more attention in the media, by reason of the increased interest which is now generally taken in the religious dimension of human realities, whether of the individual or of society. To analyse this phenomenon, one should question the readers of newspapers and the people who watch television or listen to the radio, because it is not a matter of the media imposing religion upon them unasked; it is rather that those responsible for mass communication are simply responding to specific requests they have been receiving to give more space to information and commentary on religious affairs. Throughout the entire world there are millions of persons who turn to religion in order to make sense of their lives; millions of people for whom relationship with God, their Creator and Father, is the happiest reality of human existence. The communications professionals are well aware of this, and act accordingly. And even if this interaction between those in the communications media and the public is marked by incompleteness and partiality, there is this positive fact: religion is there today in the mainstream of media information.⁴ By a happy blend of circumstances, World Communications Day in 1989 coincides with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the foundation of the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, which from now on will be a "Pontifical Council". What has it achieved in its twenty-five years of service in the apostolate of communications? Assuredly, the Church itself has learnt to discern more clearly the "signs of the times", and the phenomenon of communication is very much one of them. My predecessor Pius XII had already invited it to look upon the media not as a threat, but as a "gift" (cfr. the encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* of 1957). The Second Vatican Council in its turn solemnly confirmed this positive attitude (cfr. *Decree Inter Mirifica*, 1963). The Pontifical Commission which was then born and

which today exists as the Pontifical Council has given itself fully and perseveringly to the promotion within the Church of an attitude of participation and of creativity in this sector, or, better, in the new style of life and sharing of humanity.⁵ The question confronting the Church today is not any longer whether the man in the street can grasp a religious message, but how to employ the communications media so as to let him have the full impact of the gospel message. The Lord encourages us very directly and very simply to take the broader view in our witness and our communication: Do not be afraid ... what you hear in whispers, proclaim from the housetops (Mt. 10:26-27). To what is he referring? The evangelist throws light upon it: Christ wishes us to declare ourselves for him before men (cfr. Mt. 10:32). So here it is then, the daring, humble and serene at the same time, which inspires the Christian presence in the middle of the public media debate! St. Paul says to us: "Preaching the gospel is not a thing I boast about, since it is a duty which has been laid on me" (1 Cor. 9:16). Throughout the Scriptures the same fidelity is spoken of: "I have made no secret of your love and faithfulness in the Great Assembly" (Ps. 40/39:10), and "All men will tell what God has wrought" (Ps. 64/63:9). Communicators and public of the media, you must both question yourselves about the constantly changing demands of this "religion pure and undefiled" which invites us to keep ourselves unstained from the world (James 1:27). Even these pieces of wisdom from the Bible make you understand immediately that the great challenge of religious witness for those who are in the midst of the public debate is to keep the messages and exchanges authentic and to maintain high standards of quality in the programmes and productions.⁶ In the name of the whole Church, I wish to thank the world of communication for the place which it offers religion in the media. I am certain that I am interpreting correctly the feeling of all people of good will when I express this gratitude, even if it does often seem to us that there is room for improvement in the possibilities permitted for a Christian presence in the public debate. I am happy to join in expressing thanks to the media for giving prominence to religious information, documentation, dialogue, and data gathering. I would also like to ask of all communicators that they show themselves, by their careful adherence to the highest standards of professional ethics and practice, worthy of the opportunity given them to present the message of hope and reconciliation with God in media of every kind and discipline. The "gifts of God" (cfr. Pius XII, encyclical *Miranda Prorsus*): do we not have here a mysterious encounter between the technological possibilities of the language of communication and the openness of the human spirit to the splendid message of the Lord and His witnesses? It is at this level that the quality of our ecclesial presence in the public debate is in play. More than ever, the holiness of the apostle supposes a "divinization" (to use an expression of the Church Fathers) of the entirety of human ingenuity. It is for this reason also that the liturgical celebration of the mysteries of faith cannot be left out in this vast movement of presence to the world of today through the mass media.⁷ Thinking about all this, I make with simplicity and confidence a request for something very close to my heart. It comes out of the same feeling of friendship as that which made Paul say to Philemon: "I write with full confidence ... knowing that you will do even more than I ask" (Phil 1:21). Here is my request: give to religion all the space possible in mass communications. "Open the gates, let the upright nation come in; she, the faithful one ... who keeps the peace" (cfr. Is. 26:2a, 3a). It is this that I ask in favour of religion. You will see, dear friends, that these religious themes will have the power to inspire in the measure in which they are competently presented by professionals themselves deeply convinced of them in their own souls. Once the communicator is open to the religious message, his own message gains in quality and interest. To Church media workers I repeat: equally in your case "you have received the spirit of adoption of sons, which makes you cry out: Abba! Father!" (cfr. Rm. 8:15). The message and the initiatives of religion can be present in all types of media: in the press, in written and audio-visual information programmes, in cinematographic creations, in data banks and telematic exchanges, in theatrical communication and stage shows and high level cultural presentations, in public opinion debate and in commentaries on the news, in services which educate public thinking, in all the productions of group media, through animated drawings and quality cartoon

strips, in all the varied forms in which written literature is distributed, in audio- and video- recordings, in the moments of relaxation with music on local or network radio! It is my very ardent wish that the Catholic and Christian networks may be able to collaborate constructively with cultural communications networks of every kind, overcoming a preoccupation with competition in view of the ultimate good which comes from the message of religion. The Church itself, on this occasion of World Communications Day, invites all concerned to take under serious consideration the demand for ecumenical and inter-religious cooperation in the media.⁸ Concluding this message, I certainly must not fail to encourage all those who have at heart the apostolate of communication to give themselves with ardour and energy, and with due respect for every person, to the great work of evangelization in which each is challenged to take part: "But as for you, go and proclaim the kingdom of God" (Lk. 9:60). And there is something I must add: it is in proclaiming and in living the Word that we ourselves will come to grasp the unsuspected depths of the Gift of God. Welcoming God's will and with confidence, I declare to all of you, media workers and public, my joy at finding you linked together today across such mighty distances in a common reflection designed to find and deepen that "religion pure and undefiled" which we will all then take our part in proclaiming "from the housetops"; and I invoke on you all the blessing of the Lord. *From the Vatican, 24 January 1989, the Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.* **IOANNES PAULUS PP. II**
