

THE SPIRITUALITY OF MEDIA PEOPLE

By PIERRE BABIN

HOLY THINGS for holy people. In the past, those who trained us for the priesthood used to comment with conviction on this old adage from the Church's earliest centuries. Our hands, our whole being had to be faithful to the sacred vessels that we were called to use. We must be holy because of the holy objects we were to touch. This eminently technical vision of things is of great interest to christian media people; it has certainly led me to reflection.

Clearly I do not pretend that electronic tools are holy in themselves; I do believe, however, that their complexity and their precision, their power and their versatility make new demands on holiness. Moreover a certain type of human quality must correspond to the quality of the tool and the task, otherwise things go wrong. In our service of the public, in our professional relationships and in our use of electronic technology there is an ascending path which, if we are faithful to it, will lead us to a new kind of spirituality.

In a number of african traditions both written texts and songs proclaim the glory of shovel and scythe as workers winnow their fields. We need to invent new songs like these for our electronic tools. While technology leaps forward in a way never before envisaged, we must discern carefully what this is going to mean for spirituality. The media person's spirituality is determined by the demands both of electronic technology and of the consuming public. There are many professional ways of being involved in this task. Here I am going to be speaking mainly of those which are to do with audiovisual productions, with radio or with television, as these are the areas most familiar to me. But, as is not the case when you write a book, the producer's work is never accomplished alone; we are also talking about team work.

To enable me to speak about the christian media person's spirituality I will use images which come from the profession. These modern colourful images may surprise you. Yet to describe

his disciples, Jesus spoke of salt; why should we not speak of radar? So I will use these expressions as a modern translation of the revered images of our gospel tradition.

You are 'electronic media'

At first sight this is perhaps the most surprising and yet the most specific and fundamental aspect of our reflection. I would like to take up and to apply McLuhan's maxim: 'The medium is the message'. Or rather, it is by being medium that we become message. What does this mean?

Essentially this, our message is communicated less by our words than by our image, our gestures, our voice, in short by our whole demeanour as projected by electronic means. When the pope goes on television, as Dr de Kerckhove has remarked, his presence is certainly multiplied; he is able to be everywhere and has an aura of prestige, an affective, sensory influence which puts him in a totally different position to his predecessors. He is more symbol than word.

This is not to say that words are unimportant. No, but they have value because incarnated in the medium of a body and of electronic amplification. Without real incarnation, they would not be communicated. Electronic media has as its task to reveal our image, to give form to the quality of our voice and to multiply the ways in which we are ordinarily present. The secret purpose of electronic technology is to deliver us over to the public, body and soul, as medium, that is to say as physical presence with all that goes with this. From then on our message, because it is shaped by this electronic technology, makes healers of us rather than teachers. In gospel terms, I think the public expects miracles from us rather than theories, an incitement to live well rather than ideas.

To describe communications people, we can look at the familiar categories of ministry again: you are exorcists; your music drives out demons and raises up the human spirit. You are healers; your image and your style help other people to live. You are evangelisers; your aura opens up the possibility of paradise for everyone. You are media people, that is to say intermediaries; you unite your being to that of your listeners and invite them to resonate with you. In a certain sense, you call people to communion with your body. When you appear on the little screen, delivered over to the surprise tactics of interviewers and the whims of the public, you

say: 'Take and eat, this is my *body*'. Of course you have a doctrine, but it is communicated by this body-medium. In the gospel, we are told of Jesus that he came so that 'the hearts of many in Israel should be revealed'. Without any doubt this is the highest expectation any media person or any audiovisual production can have: to waken in others the best of themselves and lead them to take action. While a theology book's task is to explain ideas and to structure them, the audiovisual document says first of all: 'Be converted'. Political leaders know this only too well.

It follows that the consequences of this claim at the level of the spiritual life are clear. The accent will be on bodily holiness, by which I mean primarily emotional and physical holiness and upon a special quality of team work lived out in harmony with the environment. After centuries during which the spiritual life was marked by Jansenism and by Puritanism, the media civilisation calls us to integration. The spiritual formation we inherited from the past often left us with a fixed fear and at times even hatred of the body and of feelings. Today the actual experience of the media, of rock music and film clips could lead us into the opposite excess, an unleashing of frenzy. Our search for the right level of emotion (the *recta sapere*), the quest for a free and unified kind of human behaviour becomes a spiritual need. The complaint has been made that a certain number of religious have left their orders on contact with the media world. Soeur Sourire once told me, 'In convent formation I have difficulty in finding the kind of affective balance which would counteract the emotions and stress of my professional life'. This, in my opinion, is one of the main causes of the crisis we are all living through. If the practices of eastern wisdom enjoy so much prestige nowadays, is this not because they answer the particular needs of our time?

You are radar dishes

Our ancestors used to plant crosses on the mountain tops. Nowadays we put huge radar dishes up there. Is the radar dish, a circular symbol of wholeness and instrument of communication, not related to the cross?

One day up in the hills, I went past a radar dish that was swept by hurricanes of rain and wind and I said to myself: that is the christian media person—someone who resonates in sympathy with what the world is feeling, who is crucified to the telephone. The communicator's first task is not to speak but to listen. To listen to

the voice of 'my people'. Can the person who does not love this earth—its songs, its films, its publicity—can someone like this be a christian media person? What Christ is witnessed to by the person who is not sensitive to the voice of human hope that is expressed in today's magazines, in film clips, in pop music? What God is communicated by the person who is not stimulated by human struggle, the person who cannot weep over mindless poverty and contemporary catastrophes?

Madeleine Delbrel, the exemplary christian woman who works among communists, dared to write asking Johnny Hallyday for money in this way:

I'm asking *you*:

because we are in a *hurry* and you *live at speed*;

because *life is important to you* and it's a question of helping people who have no work *to live* by getting some temporary work for them. . . .

because your own experience has *opened up* your heart;

because on your gigs and surrounded by crowds you've learnt how to love people *without seeing* them.¹

M. Delbrel had understood that a media person must of necessity have an open heart whether he is called Johnny Hallyday or John Paul II.

As a Christian one has not only to resonate with the voices of this world but also with the voice of God. I have no problem in comparing the media person's prayer with the receptivity of a radar system. As people who are full of the sound of the contemporary scene, we pause to expose ourselves to God. Simply to be there, without moving. This kind of prayer is essential. Without it how are we to endure the turmoil and hassle? How are we to speak the truth into the din of daily living if the depths of our being are not in regular touch with the gospel? The key to religious audiovisual work is not theology but spiritual experience. No good scenario can be set up without experience and human feelings. It is impossible to produce a good film if you are not bringing to birth something which has been lived in your own depths. What people pick up in any such audiovisual production is that 'we have seen and touched the Word of Life'. From this you will understand that spiritual experience is much more than a moral precept; it is a *sine qua non* of our profession.

And so too we have to resonate with the voice of the Church. This goes without saying. Caught between the desires of ordinary

people and the demands of our own personality, it is not always possible to communicate the Church's voice in a sincere or personal way. A journalist from Radio Canada once said, 'The most difficult people to interview are politicians and church people: they always say what has to be said and never what they are thinking'. To speak an authentic word in this kind of context requires both honesty and humility. The media expects our fidelity to the Church to be based in a fundamental conviction rather than in the formal assent one might give to a catechism. Such a conviction has roots in suffering and courage, rather than in any kind of ideology. Media people are constantly on the watch: 'I learnt the news of John Paul I's death at one a.m.', a swiss journalist told me. 'I rang the bishop and between us we got the programme together. Everything was ready for the seven a.m. news bulletin.' A person in management loves the business he or she works for and believes in it. I do not think you could stand being a christian media person if you did not have a deep and honest love for the Church.

You are mixing desks

The mixing desk is the central piece of equipment at the heart of a radio and television studio. The mixer is an electronic instrument into which many separate items are fed and whose task it is to blend these different ingredients (songs, words, music, pictures. . .) in order to produce one compact unified language. You could say of christian media people that mixing is at the heart of their profession and spiritual life. Many different items come their way and so they are mixed beings with diversified tasks, varied people to meet and a flexible programme. They are totally given to whoever is speaking, expressing warm sympathy towards this person, an unconditional welcome; moreover they are never on one track only, they are inquisitive beings who go wherever there is human interest and who cross from one track to another. What is the principle behind this mixing? The gospel! And that is the challenge. I sometimes say to students of communications: 'Be all things to all people. Do not belong to anyone—except to God. God is the principle of your mixing, the one who gives it its direction and who brings it all together'.

I do not believe that mixing such as this is possible without the practice of meditation; meditation which has become second nature, more like constant rumination than anything one might achieve in exercises performed at 7 a.m. One journalist told me

that her best time is after midnight when, having put the paper to bed, she goes home in her car. But is such spiritual reflection possible without a period of apprenticeship or at least without special times and places for prayer? I do not think so.

Special places then first. Orson Welles, when he read Alven Toffler's book *Future shock* said, 'My first reaction was to buy an old house in the country, a house which has and which can give me roots'. The more one's life is crowded, fraught and tied up with electronics, the more one needs some special place for silence and relaxation, for space and for intimacy. A retreat like this indicates that one does have some kind of inner life. A place of prayer, however humble it may be, even if it is no more than an icon by one's bedside. This place, a physical image of the demands of the spirit, is valuable not because it is nicely set up but because one feels good there and because it is consecrated by one's presence. For this reason time has to be given to reflecting and praying there. Because we rush around so much, there has to be one place which is stable and constant.

When I reflect on the way in which so many journalists and media people live, I have to recognise that the life-style which is suited to university studies and religious life as it has been traditionally lived is simply impossible, and moreover in direct conflict with the demands of professional life. To produce a video, get a programme together or make a film means that there are 'rush' times of total tension: no question of sleeping one's full eight hours, nor of eating at the right time. Given these circumstances there is no solution except that of the law of swings and roundabouts; that is to say that you have to accept periods of complete involvement during which you give yourself without pause and times of deep silence and space; the studio is balanced by the monastery, the office by the weekend. Whoever wants to survive 'in spirit and in truth' must give serious attention to setting up this balance.

You are a team

You can write a book on your own. In the media you cannot work alone. So learning team life is essential. By team life I mean three things:

- an interconnectedness which is modelled on electronics
- professional solidarity
- friendship

Firstly, the interconnectedness which is demanded by the nature of the task. Electronic technology does not master us but, where we experience our interdependence, it can make a body of us. Any script is an image of this interdependence: words, pictures, music, sound effects are minutely timed and if the sound engineer so much as sneezes, you have to start again.² At the end of a training course at the B.B.C. several participants were not given the diploma and yet they were among the most able and creative students. The reason: 'This work demands first and foremost the discipline and control to work together as a team', the director explained.

The Jesuit, Raymond Parent, one of the founders of the Kuangchi centre in Taiwan, an audio-visual and T.V. centre with 125 people on its staff, said to me: 'Although we are supposed to be quite good on obedience. . . few Jesuits would be able to take the level of obedience required by the interdependence you have to have in audio-visual work! This means both competence and respect for each other's role.' We are a team in which each member has linked up electronic circuits built into his or her memory.

On one level this implies that we are programmed by the electronic means we use; on another it has to be said that we are conditioned by the very task we are engaged in. Our life-style as a group is not set up according to the requirements of personal development or of group dynamics but by what it is that we are producing for the public. Personally I have fallen flat on my face each time I have tried imposing upon a production team the style or rules of management training groups. Our problems are quite different: the demands of the discipline; the need to respect roles and artistic temperament; the need to learn patience at times of stress, control of one's irritation or panic, respect for lowly tasks; life in the studio and the bar; things that go wrong and things that have to be celebrated! Obviously, the life of a professional team depends on a number of factors and in particular on the producer's personality, but I have noticed that what helps to solder a group together is a sense of purpose and concern about the quality of what is being produced.

Finally we should talk about friendship. J. Naisbitt's formula is well known: 'High tech—High touch'. If you have high-grade technology you also need a high degree of personal and affective involvement. Our life in the studios, times when we are being creative or meeting people in a journalistic context, each of these

demands human warmth, the optimism of hope and deep goodwill. A media person has 'human warmth': a media person has lots of friends. Among them I believe that the media person has to have some friends, I would even say some people he loves at a really deep level. This is an intimate relationship based upon things we hold in common and things we believe in common. Without this dimension which is in a certain sense unspoken, I do not see how the media person can remain alive and creative in the depths of his or her being. More than this, I do not see how he can survive spiritually in this particular world which is made hazardous by so much excitement and affective freedom.³ The two basic charisms for communication are love and prophecy: you cannot have one without the other.

You are stars

At the national congress of social communicators held in Strasbourg in 1985, a journalist claimed: 'While the Church continues to be afraid of the "star system", social communications will be blocked to the process of evangelisation'. This is a serious point which has immense influence over what we do with our spiritual lives. A certain important college has written over its entrance gate: 'To be rather than to be seen'. So I too was taught that the significant thing is to be rather than to appear, to have correct ideas rather than brilliant ideas. This is perfectly true of course, but at the same time I was led, without my being aware of it, to despise anyone who was up-front. This version of things just does not make sense in the media civilisation. The person who is not seen does not exist. A conversion is asked for here.

St John often weighed in against the sins of the star system: 'You seek to be prized among men and do not seek the value that comes from God alone' (Jn 5,44). Such is the challenge to our spiritual life, and this challenge has no pre-established rules: you have to try really hard to appear in the brilliance of the public eye and yet to seek the glory that comes from God, not from other people. There is an ultimate test which does not lie: are we persecuted? Brilliance in itself is not the problem but brilliance for its own sake. To give your life while shining like a star is the gospel call. The christian star will be a sign of contradiction.

Aware as I am of the enormous pressures which exist in the life of the christian media person, I am conscious that I have outlined an elevated programme here. I know that we carry our treasures 'in

earthen vessels'. Nevertheless I am convinced that our profession as christian media people is rich in the highest of human and spiritual values. If few Christians come this way, it could be that few of them are aware of its holiness: 'Oh well—cinema', they say and so it cannot be serious. I think that electronic technology and the professional life which shape our body can be paths of the greatest holiness and of evangelisation in our times.

NOTES

¹ The correspondence and notes of J. Guegena and M. Delbrel, the philosopher and convert have had a deep influence on the way in which post-christian working class groups have been evangelised.

² The journal *Medias*, (21 June, 1985), in attempting to set up a register of professional people in the media, noted: 'Our intention is to group together under the same *quality tag*, professional people who are known for their *individuality*, in a more organised and *fraternal structure*' (my italics). These are the key words; individuality and fellowship go together.

³ I have treated this subject at greater depth in 'L'ère de la communication', in *Le centurion*, 1986, pp 61-70.

The English translation of this article is by Lavinia Byrne IBVM, of our editorial staff.