

# THE CHARISM OF THE RELIGIOUS ORDER AND THE MEDIA APOSTOLATE

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**L**ONG BEFORE THE appearance of centrally organized religious orders (and much longer before the arrival of the mass media) Plotinus was saying that consciousness of the self was not always a good thing, although it had its uses at times. During the two decades since the Second Vatican Council, religious congregations have been giving an unprecedented amount of critical attention to their identities, and not all of this has been healthy attention.

## *The founding charism*

*Perfectae Caritatis* had said: 'It is for the good of the Church that institutes have their own proper characters and functions. Therefore the spirit and aims of each founder should be faithfully accepted and retained, as indeed should each institute's sound traditions . . .'<sup>1</sup> The Council's call to us to 'return to our founders' has brought new life to many congregations; it has also quite often been misunderstood. As the Sri Lankan theologian Tissa Balasuriya said last year in a seminar held in Pakistan on the growing need for a third-world theology of religious life:

We must be careful to examine well what is meant by the founding charism of a religious family. Its original inspiration is usually evangelical and noble. But its application to a given social condition may be limited by the prevailing theology and the distribution of power in a society.<sup>2</sup>

It is only too easy for Catholics to tumble into ahistorical assumptions, and then all the 'modern' emphasis on the importance of the founding charism can deteriorate into traditionalism concealed

by post-conciliar clichés. A new way of trying to sabotage a bold proposal in a General Chapter is to ask 'Is this work reconcilable with our charism?'

As Tissa Balasuriya said later on, a congregation's founding charism is 'not divine';<sup>3</sup> God's grace always works in a human context.

In revitalizing the charism of the founders of religious congregations, it is useful to distinguish between the basic evangelical inspiration of love of God and neighbour and the particular works being done by a religious congregation.<sup>4</sup>

The intention, in spelling out this point like this, is to make clear, right at the start of the discussion, that when we face the question 'how can we express the charism of a religious order in mass-media apostolates?' we are not being asked how a group of religious can possibly reconcile work in what is widely thought to be the most modern and unstable of all apostolates with some venerable and immutable notion of what their objectives and way of life and spirituality are supposed to be. Neither are we being asked how the articulating of that same 'venerable and immutable notion' can be done effectively throughout the modern media. If either of those is the way we understand the question—and those are the ways quite a lot of religious still understand it—then the answer we get is going to be depressing. We might as well join the people who persist in thinking that work in media should at best be a peripheral activity for 'a good religious' and that the media can only have a very marginal place in religious life.

In reality the relationship between a person's identity as a religious, in other words as a member of a specific religious family, and his or her commitment (or lack of commitment) to a media apostolate, can be a very subtle one indeed. Not always, of course. Into the indefinite future there will continue to be religious of certain sorts—for example, hermits and nurses—who quite clearly have dedicated themselves to ways of life and work which make it very unlikely that they will ever be engaged in the media apostolate. We are thinking of the experience of members of congregations 'serving the word', whose members account for approximately one-fifth of the world's religious. The 'very subtle' relationship we are talking about is one known above all by the religious in this category that belong to the so-called 'historic orders'.

In an interview in 1981 the prize-winning German Jesuit television producer Reinhold Iblacker said:

The idea that if a religious goes into the mass media he or she is doing the most dangerous thing and is almost certain to disappear is fiction. At a certain point I understood that where I am is the middle of the Society, and I made a decision to dedicate myself to helping Father General and Rahner and de Lubac.<sup>5</sup>

But arriving at a point of view like this is by no means always easy and obvious. Reinhold Iblacker eventually found that he could in all honesty claim that what he was doing was in the heart of the Society's tradition, although, because of his work, he at times had to live in a way which did not conform to the popular idea of how Jesuits should live. (As he said later in the same interview, the world of television is 'a very secularized world, even if it is not the dangerous one some religious superiors think'). In order to get to that point not only the individual religious but his or her superiors too have to be very loyal to the 'founding charism' and at the same time interpret it as something alive and dynamic, something not frozen in the 'founding culture'.

In exploring what these loose generalizations might mean we will be drawing on the experience of several different congregations, but particularly upon Dominican experience, because the Dominican Order, the Order of Preachers, was founded to 'serve the word' more than seven hundred and fifty years ago, has had a long and important apostolate using traditional media, and has entered with very unequal success a modern mass-media apostolate. Examples of most of the strengths and weaknesses of a religious congregation with a great and ancient tradition gradually confronting the modern media apostolate can be found there.

#### *Before the explosion*

Ever since they began to arrive in the thirteenth century, the preaching and teaching orders of the Church have been only too successful in their use of a wide range of means of communication; their past success, in fact, is one of the problems today. In the best-known picture of St Dominic, the one by Fra Angelico which is actually a corner of the *Gesù deriso* in Florence, we see him seated. He is not looking at the mocked Lord. His head is down. Open on his knees is a book. For centuries one of the conventional

ways in which artists identified Dominicans in their pictures was by putting books under their arms. In the middle ages the friars played an important role in making the case-bound book a familiar communications medium, although printing by movable type did not arrive until the mid-fifteenth century.

The book. The pulpit. The adoption of a way of life which, at least in the early years, resembled the popular idea of the life of Christ's apostles. The rosary (according to legend, Our Lady herself gave St Dominic the rosary). The promotion of big popular processions, in which the people could participate—the Corpus Christi procession, for example. Towards the end of the middle ages, the popularization by the Franciscans of the Stations of the Cross. The friars invented none of these ancient media, but in the mediaeval Church they quickly became famous partly through the ways they combined them and helped to spread them. The identities of the friars, their traditions of popular communication and each Order's 'founding charism' were so closely bound together that they were assumed to be inseparable. And this, surely, could equally well be said of the Jesuits. It is now almost a truism that the Constitutions of the Society should be interpreted in the light of the teaching of the *Spiritual Exercises* rather than the other way round. The ignatian retreat, with its dramatic structure, was itself a new communications medium in the Church. Moreover, bearing in mind the stress in ignatian spirituality on the need to seek God in all things and in every situation (in other words, its incarnational character), it is not surprising to find early Jesuits quite confidently exploring seemingly secular means of communication—drama and music, for example. Finally, if ignatian spirituality primarily addressed the individual, so did the first of the genuine mass media, print, which in St Ignatius's time was already beginning to transform western society. It is not wholly coincidental that from the beginning Jesuits were quite naturally print-oriented, destined to be outstanding intellectual popularisers and builders of syntheses in the post-tridentine Church. The Society of Jesus was certainly not a product of the printing press, but its history has been intimately linked with the print medium.

By the nineteenth century print had become to such an extent the dominant medium in society that all older media tended to be seen merely as substitutes—usually poor substitutes—for print; the measure of their effectiveness was the extent that they did what print could do. The linear way of comprehending things—the way

through the printed word—was *the* way of comprehending things. And print had an important role in the life of some of the new missionary societies. In 1876, when Blessed Arnold Janssen, the founder of the Society of the Divine Word, founded his first mission press, he wrote:

For the conversion of the world our Divine Saviour taught 'Preach the gospel to all creatures'. In his own day the printed word was unknown. Now we know it and use it. The devil uses it to create harm. The servant of Christ has to use it in doing good. How powerful is the printed word, which can be multiplied a thousand times an hour on a press! It is not only a matter of quantity. The printed word has to be read and acted upon. May Our Lord help us in this work by his grace!<sup>6</sup>

This missionary society established printing presses which were also publishing houses in all its major foundations, scattered throughout the world. The nineteenth century was not only the great age of missionary expansion but also the great age of centralization in the Church, the work and government of religious congregations becoming increasingly centralized too. This centralizing had its origins not only in the defining of papal infallibility and the growth of the Vatican, but also in the arrival of the railway and steamship and telegraph and regular postal services . . . and the boom in cheap newspaper, magazine and book production. The Divine Word Missionaries were so firmly wedded to the apostolate of the printed word that only in the past generation have film, radio and television been given consideration in the Society's communications thinking and planning. And what is true of the SVD is also true of many other important new religious families of the last two centuries.

In 1914 and 1915 were founded the first two of the ten religious institutes that make up the Pauline family: the Society of St Paul and the Daughters of St Paul—institutes *specifically* dedicated to mission evangelization through the printed word. The books they publish are well-known; so is their remarkably successful magazine *Famiglia Cristiana*, and in recent years they have been moving into television, video and audio-visuals. But even in this modern religious family, from its beginnings dedicated to the mass-media apostolate, the power of print is still uncomfortably great.

*The media explode*

What has been called this century's 'media explosion'—the influx within the span of one long lifetime of a stream of different electronic media, which have together transformed our whole way of life—has brought massive opportunities as well as challenges to religious. The possibilities for the use of some of these media in evangelization are obvious enough. They also have a potentially important role in teaching and the building up of community.<sup>8</sup> In addition, their very existence calls for a new kind of pastoral work: helping Christians to be more aware of how the media are shaping their own behaviour and attitudes. (Remember that in the West watching television consumes more of the average person's time than any other activity except sleeping—nineteen times more time than the regular church-goer spends in church, on average). Finally, it is very important that religious—above all, the many religious who continue to talk in such a disdainful way about the media—understand how the media are affecting not only the lives of the people they are supposed to be speaking to but also their own lives.<sup>9</sup>

Why, all things considered, have so few of them got to grips with any of that programme? Admittedly, about half the roman catholic priests in the world involved in media are religious priests, but this is no cause for complacency; remember that by the end of the 1970s the Roman Catholic Church was spending only about five per cent of all that the world's Christians were spending on radio and television.

We cannot understand what religious have in fact been doing—or not doing—in the area of media apart from the thinking on the subject of the Church as a whole. *Communio et Progressio*, the Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication which the Vatican issued in 1971, says:

Religious Orders and Congregations will give thought to the many pressing tasks of the Church in the field of social communications and consider what they themselves can do to fulfil them under their constitutions. Their own specialized institutions for social communications will collaborate with one another and they will keep abreast of the overall pastoral planning of the diocesan offices since these are, usually, the competent bodies for the apostolate of social communications (177).

*Communio et Progressio*, however, was the Vatican's first strongly positive document about the media (so positive, in fact, that it can perhaps be criticized for being too optimistic about the good that the media can do). This has not been the tone in the past. New developments in media have occurred almost entirely independently of the Church; the Church is having to adapt itself to what is already there. Today, because of the nature and sheer complexity and variety of the modern media and the sheer quantity of information circulated, the Church could not control the media as it once did, even if it had the desire and the legal power to do so.

It is not surprising, then, that the Church's reactions to the new media have been ambiguous and in many ways still are. There was pioneering. From the 1920s onwards some remarkable religious—particularly Jesuits and Dominicans—were among the most notable pioneers in the launching of catholic radio and television and the extending of the catholic presence in the world of cinema. At the same time, there was distrust. Both *Vigilanti Cura*, the first encyclical on radio and the cinema, published in 1936 by Pius XI, and Pius XII's encyclical of 1957, *Miranda Prorsus*, which considered television as well, reflect a lot of unease. Both popes were mainly concerned with the sheltering of the faithful, and it was not clear how this could be done really effectively. And Vatican II's document on the media, *Inter Mirifica*, was almost equally ambiguous in its attitude. Many religious now in leadership roles went through their formation in the 1940s and 1950s, when the Church was most nervous about the media, and quite a lot of them remember what they were told then. And as long as religious think of the media world as a world—mainly glamorous but unpleasant and certainly morally dubious—which is very distant from their own lives, ambiguous attitudes will persist. As a religious, one's attitudes to the media are shaped substantially by one's overall understanding of religious life and of the nature of the Church.

The Master of the Dominican Order, in his report to the Order's General Chapter of 1986, says of the Order's work in the modern media (one of the Order's current priorities):

We must recall the art of Fra Angelico, who used that medium of his age to preach. It is to be expected that an Order of preachers would always seek to use all the means possible to preach the Good News . . . While some provinces have taken this priority

seriously by getting people trained and in providing equipment, it seems that most have not.

Whoever has read this article so far should have no difficulty in guessing most of the main causes of this state of affairs. Not all of them have to do with the Order's charism. For example, one factor is that widely-diffused distrust and unease just written about. Also Dominicans, especially, inherit a house which is already heavily furnished. There is the commitment to the traditional media already mentioned. And there are the demands of many long-established activities—sometimes not specifically dominican work, but work into which much money and manpower has been sunk over many generations (the running of parishes, for instance).

In addition, however, there are factors hampering media development which are an inseparable part of the founding charism of the Order. For example, the demands of the conventual style of life. Today, in the Dominican Order, the demands of community life can quite often be in tension with the demands of 'the job' (and, as one Provincial observed, work in some of the media calls for quite a lot of dedication). And there is another part of the founding charism—in other words, fraternal government, government at all levels by chapter—which makes it much more difficult for the Dominicans than for, say, the Jesuits to restructure the Order's patterns of activity, to launch major projects and to equip people for specialized careers in the Order. Thirteenth-century systems of government are not always ideally suited for the world of media. Finally, the strong cerebral emphasis in the Order's academic tradition (another inseparable part of the Order's founding charism) has—at least until recently—also been a factor working against 'conversion' to many of the new ways of communicating, with their emphasis on intuition and feeling. In the words of a dominican bishop: 'It is certainly most important for the Church to be in the media. But, because of the way I was formed in the Studium, it is hard for me personally to take the modern media seriously'.

Other religious can doubtless make a similar analysis of their own congregations. And the dominican situation is not, of course, wholly negative. According to the latest world-wide survey<sup>10</sup> one male Dominican in every fifteen is regularly working in media or helping others to work in media, about one third of the dominican friars in media have their work in media for their main job, and

of every ten jobs in media being done by dominicans, six are in print, three in the electronic media. This is not a good showing, bearing in mind that we are speaking about the Order of Preachers, but it is not an utterly disgraceful one, and some Dominicans—in France, for instance—have done excellent work in the modern media. Many Dominicans would argue that other aspects of the founding charism and tradition of the Order—for example, the unique place given to preaching, a spirituality that binds together communication and contemplation (*contemplata aliis tradere*, to quote Aquinas), and a moral theology that gives an important place to freedom—encourage the would-be venturer into media much more than the aspects of the Order's charism and tradition already mentioned hamper him.

*The wider society's contribution*

Here, however, we come back to the point we made earlier in this article about the dynamism of the charism of a religious order. It is fairly widely observed that religious in many parts of the Third World—notably Latin America—are communicating through modern media with a confidence by and large lacking in their brothers and sisters venturing into mass communications in Europe. There are doubtless several reasons for this, but it would seem to be the case that where religious are caught up in wider trends in society they exploit the means of communication acceptable in the society much more spontaneously, and with much more sureness of touch. The religious who identify closely with the needs and hopes of a people in the upheaval of change—as did many of the religious in the nineteenth-century immigrant Churches of Britain and the United States and as do many of the religious in parts of Central America today—do not seem to have western difficulties in conveying spiritual truths by popular means. In fact, what some of them have done demonstrates that, contrary to what is widely thought, it is indeed possible for religious to communicate today with a mass audience without jettisoning their traditions. Whether the charism of a religious congregation is 'liberating' or 'inhibiting' for its members who are media people would seem to be at least partly dependent on the context in which those members are living out their vocations.

So attempts by religious congregations to get their members more involved in the media by setting up central offices dedicated to promoting the media apostolate are not likely to secure all the

results that common sense suggests that they should. In 1980 Anatole Baillargeon OMI, the Oblates' Information Officer, even spoke of 'the illusion that a religious institute can develop a thrust in the world of communications by installing one or more of its members in a General House'.<sup>11</sup> In fact, some individual religious—for example, the scottish Franciscan, Bishop Agnellus Andrew and the swiss Jesuit Stefan Bamberger—have done a lot to make religious congregations more open to the challenge of the media, but these would be among the first to agree that today (unlike twenty years ago) general exhortations like 'We must go into the media!' are not very useful. General exhortations may help enthusiastic individuals by weakening the fears and doubts of their superiors, but they are not likely to produce much that is concrete—and that can be discouraging. No, the sort of initiatives that will produce results are rather different.

On the other hand, there is still a need nearly everywhere in the Church for something even more basic than general exhortations about the importance of media: namely, a better understanding of the communications process—above all, the recognition that it is a *shared* process. If we seriously want to know what it means to say 'we are living in a media-made world', we should start not by getting ourselves briefed on a lot of new gadgetry but by learning more about ourselves, seeing how we fit in the communications process. And if we are religious called to be preachers or teachers this must mean, among other things, reflecting in a fresh way on the founding charism of our congregation. By this I mean we are to stop reflecting on it in the introspective way which has been all too common, a way that leads us to see this charism as a cluster of boundaries setting us over against the world and enabling us to talk down to the world from on high. On the contrary, we are to recognize the charism as part of the communications process itself, as a mediator of the gospel message. Then even people in godless old Europe might hear us a little better.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life, 2 (b).

<sup>2</sup> 'Religious life and First World theology', *Focus* (PO Box 288, Multan), vol 5, no 2, p 96.

<sup>3</sup> 'Elements for a Third World theology of religious life', *op.cit.*, p 111.

<sup>4</sup> 'Re-evaluation of works of religious', *op.cit.*, p 130.

<sup>5</sup> Hofmann, E. & Mills, J. O.: (eds), *The 1981 multimedia international year book* (Rome), p 57.

<sup>6</sup> Eilers, F. J.: 'Proclaim the good news to all creation—SVD and Communication', *The 1980 multimedia international year book* (Rome), p 19.

<sup>7</sup> *ibid.*, p 20.

<sup>8</sup> Cf elsewhere in this Supplement, 'The new communications emerging in the Church'.

<sup>9</sup> Cf elsewhere in this Supplement, 'Christian discernment in a mass-media culture'.

<sup>10</sup> *Dominican friars in the communications media* (Il Centro Domenicano per i Media, Santa Sabina, 00153 Rome), p 115.

<sup>11</sup> 'Reflections of a religious on social communications', *The 1980 multimedia international year book*, p 8.