

PLANNING A COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH TO COMMUNICATION APOSTOLATES

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PASTORAL PLANNING for Communication Apostolates is a very rare phenomenon. And yet if religious congregations or dioceses are ever to commit themselves, they must first catch a glimpse of why communications should be considered one of their charisms and of what is possible realistically. These questions I have attempted to answer briefly and to provide a blueprint of different possibilities which may stimulate imaginations and open up avenues for exploration.

However, instead of returning once again to a review of the documentation (as one person remarked recently at a meeting in Rome, 'Must we really go back to the beginning each and every time'), I thought that the following excerpt from an address by John Paul II to the Bishops of Provence Méditerranée would help give a sense of direction to our reflection and list the essential elements for any attempt at planning:

Yes, the means of social communication in today's world are very powerful and omnipresent, and their influence will undoubtedly become even greater. The media can awaken conscience, support the cause of human rights, and unite men in admiration for the same cause, in the same craving for freedom, justice and peace; in short, they can be the occasion for communion and progress . . . Clearly you are not insensitive to the danger presented by the abundance of information and ideologies being passed on to the multitude of readers, listeners and viewers, without their having enough help in reaching a valid judgment on such information. But since there can be no question of waiting passively for a world in which the Gospel alone would be offered to all, we must, with

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imaginative and unwavering courage, and with adequate resources, *put God into the thinking of the modern world*. This goal is a missionary goal, as you know. I exhort you to pursue it with renewed conviction. Love of our neighbour demands that we let our brothers hear, in the language and images which they understand, the message of the Gospel that gives meaning to their lives and answers their deepest aspirations, the message which offers salvation. Otherwise, faith is marginalized and many of the baptized abandon the practice of prayer and communion. 'The break between Gospel and culture is without doubt the drama of our age' (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, no 20). It is therefore up to us, whose task it is to offer the Gospel to our fellows, to plan, organize and conduct a pastoral of the means of social communication. Grasp the new opportunities offered to you. Be sure to enter into discussion with those responsible for informing and entertaining. Take account of the public's usages in the way you intervene as Christians. Do not hesitate to train yourselves and to train others for this task of spokesman for the faith. Let spontaneity go hand in hand with a refusal to improvise. Continue to support an explicitly Catholic press. At your 1981 General Assembly in Lourdes you decided that what was needed was integration of the presence of the media into thinking and pastoral action. This objective implies regional and national co-operation and, in view of the importance of the resources committed, also international co-operation.

The Holy Father is calling for (1) the development of a critical awareness in readers, viewers and listeners—a goal set by *Inter Mirifica* more than twenty years ago, but one that is still to be taken seriously by most of the educational establishment worldwide. (2) He then offers the challenge 'to put God into the thinking of the modern world' which, he states, will call for imagination, courage and resources. Media have a special role here for men and women today are convinced that anything of importance will be covered by the media and, conversely, if there is an almost total lack of coverage, it is simply because the subject is not considered important. (3) In stating a goal which is so obviously a missionary one, the Holy Father in effect places this apostolate within the charism of every religious congregation insofar as each has a missionary dimension. But it is no longer a question of a mission mandate only to this or that particular region of the world. Now the mandate is universal—to Roman Catholics practising and

non-practising, to those who have drifted away, to men and women of all religions and of no religion, to all men and women of good will. The Pope then calls for the development of (4) a new audio-visual language, (5) training, (6) on-going contact with media professionals, (7) an eagerness to grasp the new opportunities which media offer, (8) an explicitly catholic press and (9) regional, national and international co-operation.

It seems to me that one more item should be added to the list—the necessity for others to see us Christians living publicly the things we pray about in the secrecy of our hearts for ‘modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses’. The Pilgrim Pope, John Paul II, has made this statement of Paul VI his own. In his trips around the globe, he reaches out not only to his fellow Catholics, but to the population of an entire country and of the world. Should Christianity be seen in action? Has it become, as some maintain, a purely private matter in our day? No, replies John Paul II and he proceeds to show what he means by capturing the headlines in the morning newspapers and filling the television screens in the evening with vibrant images of the celebration of the faith. To take but one example: approximately two million Canadians saw him in person on his recent canadian tour—no small number—but almost negligible when compared with the sixteen million who followed the visit on canadian television and the potential one hundred and seventy million viewers globally, thanks to the services of the host broadcaster. Even before he flew home, the visit had created:

a cacophony of plaudits and criticisms, interpretations and debate. Responses spanned the chasm between ecstasy and a shrug. For the vast majority, the papal visit was a spiritual tonic and a riveting historical event. For the few it was a lavishly tedious media extravaganza.

But for all, whether they realized it or not, it was a question of a holy man putting God back on the agenda of everyday living. The Pilgrim Pope does not accept the view that religion has become privatized in our society and he calls on Christians everywhere to ‘go public’. Speaking to members of Italian Catholic Action earlier this year, he called on them not ‘to hide their christian identity in order to placate opponents of evangelism’.

In terms then of planning a comprehensive approach to communication apostolates, it seems to me that, as religious, we should begin with this basic question of 'communication as witness'. A decision to name an Information Officer, or for larger congregations to establish an Information Office, would constitute a first step. But the job consists in more than assigning the responsibility to a general councillor or to some other religious on a part-time basis, as often happens now, or in putting out a bulletin several times a year and an annual review of apostolates and events. The 'new model' takes into consideration that the Church is often depicted in the media in a poor light. An answer, even if only a partial one, is to write the stories of dedicated and interesting people in a captivating way, using quality pictures and graphics. A person with some training in communications and journalism might recommend dropping a bulletin altogether (usually a rehash of materials from other bulletins and often 'stale news' as a result), replacing it with a digest containing current news clips, news releases, short features on 'people in the news' and topical events. Interplay between generalates and provinces would become much more common on the level of information—rather than just that of government. As most editors readily admit, people today read less and less. Therefore a real effort has to be made to make the materials attractive—and professional—to make them, if you like, readable. Goodwill is no longer a sufficient excuse for rank amateurism!

Distribution and circulation are also very important yet usually receive little attention. Does each member of the community receive a personal copy or is only one copy (would you believe—to save money) sent to a house, destined, hopefully, for a bulletin board? What other 'target audiences' might there be? Colleagues sharing in an apostolic endeavour? Family and friends? Local or regional catholic newspapers? Weeklies? Hosts of radio or television programmes? As stated earlier, this dimension hardly ever surfaces. But people everywhere are interested in people and if we want them to share in our vision, if we want them to know what we are doing and why we are doing it, we have to be willing to share our lives with them in an open way. In June, *Gente*, an Italian magazine, ran a scoop on John Paul II. One photo showed him catching forty winks under a tree with a rug thrown over him, another was of him standing by a running stream in tennis sneakers with a bamboo hiking pole in his hand. Far from being upset at

seeing the Pope on a day's outing in the mountains, reactions were very positive. One respondent wrote that the 'photos aroused in me a great tenderness and for the first time I felt really close to him'.

The possibilities, as I have been trying to suggest, are almost limitless. All it takes to actuate them is imagination, creativity, a modicum of training, backed up by commitment and an adequate budget. So much for the first step. In terms now of the development of the idea, I would like to propose a model in five stages, which is capable of meeting a variety of demands beyond what we have been considering.

Stage 1 would begin with the creation of a Pastoral Communications Centre. A resource to assist a number of apostolates to adapt to the demands of the new communications world, modest in conception both in terms of capital outlay, space and annual operating costs, such a centre would be both 'a lending library of audio-visual materials' and a documentation unit of what was available in soundslide programmes, film strips, audio- and video-cassettes. A sense of marketing is not yet a strength in church circles. Even so, an ever-increasing number of programmes is gradually becoming available, if you can track them down, in a variety of subjects—John Paul II, Mother Teresa and other church leaders, the sacraments, biblical figures, the saints, small christian communities, vocation promotion, faith and justice issues, etc. Audio-cassettes on the new 'liturgical music' and on 'healing music', on scripture, prayer and contemplation, on retreats are now available. These cassettes are not 'a poor recording of a lecture' but are rather the result of a creative approach to a new medium. Video-cassettes have been appearing at a much slower pace, but even here a start has been made with programmes on the sacraments, on catholic leaders in various fields. Titles include *Jesus, his life and his land; The Holy land—5,000 years; Discovering the Lord—a prayer retreat; The good news according to Mark; A matter of love.*

The centre should also have a slide collection, catalogued by subject matter, for example, nature, beauty, drugs, family, happiness, sickness, death, resurrection, loneliness, race, youth, war, peace, spirit, etc., along with a popular music collection of titles at the head of the pop charts.

This phase is intended to appeal particularly to young people and to families 'in the language and images they understand'. Results of market research published recently indicate 'images,

impressions are what count for the young, not words'. Their thinking tends to be non-linear; their favourite television programmes are fast-paced, moving into new action every two or three minutes; they hold institutions and corporations in distrust; they can be reached through humour and they look for the unusual; they are more inner-directed, value personal expression and creativity and strive for self-actualization. These are all things that Marshall McLuhan was saying twenty-five years ago but few really believed him.

Through a centre of the type I am describing the possibility of reaching out to the young through creative programming in visuals and sound becomes a reality. At the same time, young people will be able, through the facilities available at the centre, to create their own sound-slide programmes, experiment with a portable video-camera and create video-programmes which reflect their spirituality and their value systems. To provide these possibilities, some equipment will have to be purchased which could then be rented out for a small fee—several projectors for slides, film and sound, a video-cassette playback unit, several cameras for slide duplication, a small portable television camera with basic accessories, a sound mixer and a $\frac{1}{2}$ " television editing machine. Without great cost, phase one can be successfully launched.

Stage 2, in addition to offering the services already outlined, would provide workshops on graphics, sound, photography, video and the ways of telling stories effectively in picture and sound. It would also include a strong component on basic journalism, on how to write successfully a feature article or a guest editorial and on photo-journalism, on how to tell a story by grouping a series of artful but newsworthy pictures into a narrative that makes words subordinate or unnecessary. At this stage, workshops on media education for teachers and parents could be offered—education here understood as helping to 'create a critical awareness of mass media productions, an understanding of the language of image and sound, an insight into the structure of the mass media and an ability to produce simple products'. If teachers once learn to de-mystify media, the hope is that they in turn will wish to repeat the process with their students. Films, newspapers, popular music and television would be included in the programme. With a number of good course outlines now available in many countries, the centre could begin promoting this educational effort almost

from the outset. The workshops will enrich any understanding gained in the media education programme and vice versa.

But to establish such a centre and begin offering programmes is not enough. Pastoral planning would have to include a clear statement of what the centre was attempting to do and an explanation of why this is important today. Moreover, planning would have to include a healthy promotion budget and an imaginative marketing strategy to attract and hold an ever-increasing number of users.

In terms of development, this stage could very well be terminal, yet would meet a great need for, in the words of the Secretary of the Extraordinary Synod in 1985, 'knowledge of the faith has sunk to an all-time low'. The approach suggested here could easily begin to reverse the trend and is intended to meet the needs of the christian community.

For those prepared to move beyond the creative use of small media, *Stage 3* would represent a quantum leap forward in both attitude and thinking for:

the Church does not speak and listen to her own members alone; her dialogue is with the whole world. By virtue of a divine command, and by the right to knowledge possessed by the people whose lot she serves on earth, the Church is in duty bound publicly to communicate her belief and her way of life (*Communio et Progressio*).

Or in the words of Paul VI:

Our century is characterized by the mass media . . . and the first proclamation, catechesis or the further deepening of faith cannot do without these means . . . they enable the Good News to reach millions of people. The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect . . . In them she finds a modern and effective version of the pulpit.

Easier said than done, as sad experience has shown over the past few decades. The world of media is huge, all-embracing, complex, mystifying. To step into this world, even gingerly, would mark a radical change in outlook for a religious congregation.

At this stage, outreach to media professionals—writers, artists, performers, directors and producers—becomes a must. (I am

assuming, of course, that a centre with Stage 3 possibilities would be situated near a large metropolitan area). This constitutes an area of ministry which, for the most part, has been little explored. A programme of outreach could include seminars on subjects of possible interest to professionals: media ethics, currents of spirituality among the young, the evolution of freedom of information in the Church, etc. There could be the possibility also of exploring with professionals 'the creation of a christian public opinion' and the means of developing 'a public moral consensus that favours religious values'. A retreat experience is certainly a possibility! What I am proposing is that seminars or symposia would have to be planned around common needs or interests if this approach were to succeed. As Fr Pedro Arrupe said so well when referring to the mass-media apostolate: 'We must remain flexible and able to change to meet pressing human problems and, specifically, to study the dominant ideas that determine the march of history'.

Training now takes on new meaning and becomes professionally oriented. Advanced workshops in journalism and script-writing, in video-production, in advertising and public relations become mandatory if this effort is to be successful. The objective now is to prepare Christians to take advantage of the many opportunities that are being missed at present to tell our stories. Openings in daily and weekly newspapers and magazines would be pursued in terms of feature articles, news releases or guest editorial spots. Catholic newspapers would profit greatly from such workshops in terms of the quality of reporting, improved layout and design. Parish bulletins could become almost unrecognizable.

Radio and television, in many countries, are now providing new opportunities—guest appearances on talk shows, telephone call-in programmes on vital issues, spots for each major feast during the liturgical year. But anything less than at least a semi-professional approach will not do—better not to try.

In terms of television, cable in many countries holds out the greatest possibilities at the present time. (If not available, then substitute video for what I am recommending here). New script ideas, experimental programming, street dramas and so on can all be attempted on very low budgets and at the same time provide valuable experience for talented learners. It is interesting to note that cable is now being used in the United States by networks to test the market's reaction to new programmes before they are scheduled on the commercial networks.

But in radio and television, I am not speaking of broadcasting a religious service (except as a service for the sick and shut-ins!). Rather I am thinking of a new way of celebrating the faith—by hearing personal stories on radio and by seeing the faith community on television—at work, at play, at prayer and of hearing what gives meaning and purpose to our lives. At the outset a portable television camera with a knowledgeable team of two is all that is needed. The team films short excerpts around the diocese or region editing all the parts together to make an interesting and newsworthy programme. In the very act of giving visibility to the faith community, the faith-life itself of that community is strengthened and supported while at the same time, for their neighbours, the community is witnessing to the centrality of Christ in their lives.

The objectives of each stage of development are modest; they are within reach; they do not demand great sums of money nor professional equipment and the outreach has been first to Christians and then to Christians and non-Christians alike.

Stage 4 envisions the creation of a Video Production Unit and/or a national newspaper or magazine. It is a natural development but now it is a question of a national or even international approach. There is great need everywhere for quality television and video programmes which deal directly or indirectly with religious content. But television and video have become so sophisticated that for the Churches to compete for audiences—I use the term advisedly—is a bigger challenge than they have been willing to face. On this level, creativity, management skills and adequate financing, not to mention advertising and marketing techniques, will have much to do with determining success or failure. It is no longer a question merely of technical ability but rather the insights of the artist who has something worthwhile to share. Arthur Lipsett and his work come to mind immediately. *21-87* is a rare film experience: the title gives no clue on how to 'read' this short film. The juxtaposition of visuals and audio does not help either. There appears to be no story line. Only when the viewer can be led to look inward and reflect on his emotional experience can a breakthrough be made. This kind of film is rare in church circles which have been conditioned to count heavily on the verbal component—and that spelled out very explicitly.

As I write these lines, the 9th International Week of Christian Television in Mainz has just come to an end. From the statement of the jury, it seems clear that once again many have been

disappointed at the level of creativity reached by most programmes. And this was so at the 8th International Week and the 4th and the 1st! Christian writers and directors have yet to accept, or so it seems, that words on the screen have much less effect than images, that although documentaries in a journalistic style do have a place, the great need is for dramatic series which would attract and hold countless viewers. Again, most christian writers have not discovered humour and the use of irony . . . and young people: especially young people, who continue to be overlooked almost completely.

Stage 4 foresees a new type of apostolic team—clerical, religious and lay—with talent as writers, directors and producers. Unlike broadcasting, where even today an unfriendly government or network system can bar access to the media, in video there are generally only the restrictions we ourselves decide to impose. Do we as a community have anything of value or interest to say? Do we know how to say it in an entertaining yet informative way? Have we developed artists who are in touch with the fears and hopes of everyone? Have we kept up with developments following on Vatican II? Do we have enough conviction to risk—on the quality of the script, the actors, the technical crew and the audience? Examples are not that difficult to find in the secular field where stations like Channel 4 in Britain have been successful in featuring provocative political-opinion shows and foreign art films and have managed to attract audiences in the millions. They have also managed to pool their resources with others, to enter into co-production contracts on a number of successful scripts. Another thought-provoking example is that afforded by the Cannes Film Festival where this year (1986) three awards were made to films which had a mystical and religious theme. But just as for any other major apostolate, large sums of money would have to be invested to launch such a project.

A different option for Stage 4 would be the decision to begin a national catholic newspaper or popular magazine. We are all aware of the small journals of opinion of which there are so many in the Church. The magazine here under consideration would be intended for mass audiences, carrying typical articles of general interest, with pictures of current folk heroes and would feature many ideas and people that are dominating the world scene. The difference? The interjection of a christian viewpoint on some current issues which otherwise might never have an opportunity to be heard. We have great stories to tell. We have interesting people to interview.

They are willing to witness to Jesus Christ in their lives and they are willing to talk about the meaning of those lives with others.

This Stage may seem completely unreal to many. A dream! A mirage! Yet for some of these same people it is not extraordinary to consider a congregation or a diocese investing millions in schools or colleges or hospitals. A breakthrough could come, perhaps, on an ecumenical level in terms of a co-operative effort mounted on a national scale.

One final stage remains to be considered briefly. *Stage 5* looks to the creation of a small policy team, each member holding an advanced degree in some area of communications. Pastoral planning for dioceses or even nationally; recommendations on the training of clergy, religious and lay persons in the area of communication and theology; the commissioning of research and the dissemination of the results of the research; the analysis of university programmes available to prospective students, including their strengths and weaknesses; the drafting of statements appropriate for the Church's evangelizing task and the updating of church leaders on the new information technologies; these and similar assignments would constitute their mandate.

These, then, are some of the options a religious congregation might consider seriously before beginning a communications apostolate. The blueprint does not pretend to be all-inclusive, nor is it offered with any suggestion that it should be considered the only approach. It will have served its purpose if, in the words of Jesuit John Staudenmaier, it will have encouraged congregations to consider going

to a place (technological, geographical, etc.) where belief is unlikely, to stay long enough to learn the language fluently, to embrace the tension between the faith I'm living and where I'm living and eventually to speak the faith so that it will be understood.