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The Teaching of John Paul II and the Mission of the Media

John Paul II was fascinated by the media. No pope, but even not many experts in journalism, have written so extensively about the media, and by no means not only every year on the occasion of the World Communications Day. But, more than that, John Paul was himself the greatest “communicator”- much more, one can say, than even Ronald Reagan. Albeit John Paul II himself wrote that *“through the history of salvation, Christ present himself to us as the “communicator” of the Father... The eternal Word made flesh, in communicating himself.”*¹ And indeed how could we achieve communion without communication and vice-versa? And the Gospel itself is news, it is the eu-angelion, the good news. And one can say that the apostles were the best foreign correspondents of all times. In fact pope Paul VI wrote that Saint Paul, whose Letters to the Corinthians are a brilliant media job, would probably be a journalist, if he would come back now to earth!²

The great power of the media, for good or ill, was certainly recognized by John Paul II. And it is a particular responsibility for us, Christians, to use this power properly. Indeed our duty is to show our faith in action, in dealings. *“This is the great task for our generation, for all Christians of our day: to bring the light of Christ into daily life. To bring it into the “modern areopagi”, into the vast territories of contemporary civilization and culture, of politics and economics. Faith cannot be lived only in the depths of the human soul”,* underlined John Paul.³ And as a matter of fact, to quote again the Holy Father, *“the first Areopagus of modern times is the world of communications... The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial,*

¹ Apostolic Letter to those responsible for communications “the Rapid Development” (24/01/2005)

² Paul VI, speech to the International Union of the Catholic Press (1/12/1963)

³ JPII, speech in Legnica, Poland (2/06/1997)

*and social behavior”.*⁴ Indeed the role of the media is permanently growing: *“The constant development of the means of social communication has a growing influence on people and public opinion and this increases the responsibility of those who are directly involved in the sector, because it induces them to make inspired choices in the search for truth and in serving the common good.”*⁵

The failures of the Media

So, we can serve the citizen and promote the dignity of the human person. But we can also corrupt and drag down. And alas we have more often to deal with the failure than with the mission of the media (as we say in French, “*démission*” instead of “*mission*”). “This is precisely why, writes John Paul, *“the Church is so concerned with the direction taken by the means of social communication, which have the duty of forming as well as informing their vast audience. Knowing the vast and powerful impact of the media, she never tires of reminding communications workers of the dangers arising from the manipulation of truth. Indeed, what truth can there be in films, shows and radio and television programmes dominated by pornography and violence? Do these really serve the truth about man? Such questions are unavoidable for those who work in the field of communications and those who have responsibility for creating and marketing media products”*⁶ and in the same “Letter to the Family” He adds: *“Is it an exaggeration to say that the mass media, if they are not guided by sound ethical principles, fail to serve the truth in its fundamental dimension? This is the real drama: the modern means of social communication are tempted to manipulate the message, thereby falsifying the truth about man. Human beings are not the same thing as the images proposed in advertising and shown by the modern mass media. They are much more, in their physical and psychic unity, as composites of soul and body, as persons.”*

The Holy Father could not accept this situation and made it known. Visiting Poland in 1991 He said: *“Haven’t the principles of freedom been uprooted from our land by the Evil hiding under different covers? Haven’t they*

⁴ Apostolic Letter “the Rapid Development”

⁵ Message to the Catholic Union of the Italian Press, 1999

⁶ Letter to the Family (1994)

been pecked out by a variety of birds of propaganda, publications and programs which play with our human weakness?”⁷ and 3 days later in Włocławek the pope warned and asked: “do not let us become embroiled in this whole civilization of lust and abuse that grows unrestrainedly among us, taking advantage of the various means of communication and of seductive perversion... Is this civilization or anti-civilization? Culture or rather anti-culture? We ought to go back to basic notions: culture can only be what makes the human being more human and not what simply ‘consumes’ his humanity”.

Some of the media problems

Why is it so? What are the main problems we, people of the media, are facing? One is certainly **linked to globalisation**. As said pope John Paul II, “*globalisation is neither good or bad; it will be what the people will do with it*”⁸. Unfortunately so far globalisation is not showing a too friendly human face. In “*Le Monde Diplomatique*”⁹, Ignacio Ramonet has shown how the industrial giants, from the utilities, electronic activities, telephone, water or armament sectors have jumped into the media world. America Online is controlling Netscape, Time, Warner Bros and CNN; Bill Gates is the king of software but also of the press photography through his agency Corbis; Rupert Murdoch owns a variety of British and American papers, like The Times, The Sun, The New York Post, a satellite network BskyB and also a major film production company the 20th Century Fox. Some are trying in Europe to follow the model. Bertelsmann has a lot of papers, radios and TVs; the same is true with Sergio Berlusconi in Italy. In France our two biggest groups are controlled by Serge Dassault and Jean-Luc Lagardère, both involved... in the armament industry!

As writes Ramonet, “*all those concentrations are a danger for the pluralism of the press and for democracy. Moreover they put the emphasis on profits, instead of quality*”. The former president of “*Le Monde Diplomatique*” continues: “*one of the precious rights of the human being is the right to freely*

⁷ Łomża (4/06)

⁸ Address to the Academy of Social Sciences (Vatican, 26/04/2001)

⁹ “Médias concentrés”, *Le Monde diplomatique* (12/2002)

communicate one's thoughts and opinions. In democratic societies, the freedom of speech is not only guaranteed, it goes together with another fundamental right: the right to be well informed. But this right is endangered by the concentration of the media, by the merging of newspapers once independent into hegemonic groups. Should the citizens accept this hijacking of the freedom of the press? Can they tolerate that information is reduced to a banal commodity?"

Paul Krugman, who recently received the Nobel price for economy, expressed similar concerns in *"The New York Times"*. He says almost pleasantly that in the US you get your news from what he calls *"AOLTimeWarnerGeneralElectricDisneyWestinghouseNewsCorp."* and he adds: *"the handful of organizations that supply most people with their news have major commercial interests that inevitably tempt them to slant their coverage, and more generally to be deferential to the ruling party"*. And Paul Krugman concludes: *"for the time being, blatant media bias is still limited by old rules and old norms of behavior. But soon the rules will be abolished, and the norms are eroding before our eyes. Do the conflicts of interest of our highly concentrated media constitute a threat to democracy? I've reported; you decide"*.¹⁰

This globalised concentration of media is also bringing about a dull **uniformity of the media**. Here we are faced not only with a world-wide domination of American-made media, where for example 70% of all the film series presented on the TV screens in Europe and not only come from Hollywood. Indeed this uniformisation is taking place in the US as well, with media people in Colorado or South Carolina complaining- as I witnessed personally- that they are not able to address topics important for the local people, since they are channelling what is presented by their main company based in California or New York.

With this is linked a very strange phenomenon: we pretend to live in an era of globalisation, yet we know less and less about each other! The superficiality of our media is such that the French knows very little about the American way of life and vice-versa, not to mention of course that the Muslim

¹⁰ "In Media Res", New York Times (29/11/2002)

do not know much about the Jew and vice-versa, just to take an example. The consequences are grave: instead of building mutual knowledge, we are responsible for a world-wide **lack of mutual understanding**.

The rule of consumerism, greed and money-making is certainly another culprit. The deontology is gone. The goals are profits and ratings. If there is a feeling that sensationalism, pornography and violence are leading to those goals, so let us use them! We can only see in all this what John Paul II called, in the same address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences already quoted, “*the intrusive, even invasive character of the logic of the market*”. At the end of the day we have what expressed openly and cynically Patrick Le Lay, when he was the president of the French television TF1. Describing his company’s mission he said: “*The job of TF1 is to help Coca-Cola to sell its product. What we sell to Coca-Cola is an availability of human brain-time.*”¹¹ I remember myself that at some point in my career the director of a big newspaper of which I was the correspondent for Eastern Europe asked me to indulge more in sensationalism: “*your analyses are fine, he said; you are probably right. But you are taking it easy being in Warsaw. My task is different: I have to sell a product every morning. Today it’s a newspaper, maybe tomorrow it will be soap; no difference*”. I had a hard time trying to explain that there is a huge difference and that, while the media are a business, they are not a business as usual since we, journalists, are there as human beings and citizens addressing other human beings and citizens and therefore we do have a particular responsibility.

When I served as a research fellow at Harvard University, a few years back, it was a shock for me to hear the biggest names in the media in America, people at the top of our trade, expressing their sadness at what are now the media. Dan Rather, the famous CBS anchor (recently retired), expressed his dismay to see American TV, in spite of its enormous means, going from bad to worse and US journalists not being able to fulfil their mission. “*Our reputation, he said, has been reduced, our credibility cracked, justifiably; this has happened because too often for too long we have answered to the worst, not to the best within ourselves and within our audience*” and he added: “*we have allowed this great instrument, this resource, this weapon for the good to be squandered and*

¹¹ In *Les Dirigeants face au changement*, Paris 2004.

cheapened.. The best among us hang our heads in embarrassment, even shame". Another celebrated former anchor, Ted Koppel, expressed similar concerns and saw in the decay of journalism "*the inevitable consequence of the market place bringing its economic forces to bear on journalism*". R. W. Apple Jr., the Washington bureau chief of the "*New York Times*" stated that "*much of American journalistic resources and energy is today devoted to unserious work*" and he added that, as bad money drove out good money, so "*bad journalism is driving out good journalism*", concluding that "*we are increasingly in the hands of people who don't share our values and who don't think what we do is important*".

Another cause of the media crisis is **the trivialisation of our agenda**. We are presenting on our screens or papers news that are irrelevant, sensationalist, superficial...and depressing, instead of addressing the topics truly important to the society. Already the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu noted that: "*putting the emphasis on events of little significance, filling the limited time we have with nothing- or almost nothing- we kick out relevant topics that would be needed for the citizen to exercise his democratic rights*".¹² Sometimes, it seems that all this could be done on purpose and that some people are dreaming of **a democracy without citizens**. If it is true, they better awake and understand that this is leading us only to a tragedy!

This money-making approach, this focusing on "ratings" leads us also towards the presentation of more and more violence and sex on our screens but also on many tabloids. Instead of educating the people, we are becoming **a tool for depraving** our audience and particularly the young people!

We do have as well the tendency to **overemphasize the bad news**. If it bleeds, it's leads. Today's journalist is the contrary of the eu-angelos. Indeed, when we watch our TV news, we have 90-95% of bad, dramatic news, showing all the bad sides of human behaviour. Violence, killings, suicides, corruption, mafia, you name it. In fact, as shows the success in France of an organisation called "Reporters of hope", there is among the public a calling, not for a rosy approach to the reality, but for a much more balanced presentation of the realities of our world, where- thanks God!- we still have many people working

¹² "Sur la télévision", 1996

for the good. Indeed, reminds us John Paul II, *“in a large strata of today's society there is a strong desire for good which is not always adequately acknowledged in newspapers and radio-television news bulletins, where the parameters for evaluating events are often marked by commercial rather than by social criteria. There is a tendency to favour “what hits the headlines”, what is “sensational”, instead of what would help people understand world events better. The danger is the distortion of the truth.”*¹³

Another difficulty is paradoxically linked to the technological progress. We can now report immediately from any part of the world. Ted Koppel, already mentioned, said that the fact that he is able to comment events live from anywhere is a “technological tour de force”, but at the same time he is conscious that his work is not as good as it was, since he has no time to prepare, to reflect and to edit his program. Similarly, we now have all the facts we want, but for what good? We have everything on the internet and on 500 TV channels. We are inundated by news, everywhere and every minute. As we have fast-food, we are getting accustomed to **“fast-news”**.

Therefore we have the information, but we don't know **the meaning** of the news. As rightly wrote John Paul II: *“This is certainly not an easy mission in an age such as ours, in which there exists the conviction that the time of certainties is irretrievably past. Many people, in fact, believe that humanity must learn to live in a climate governed by an absence of meaning, by the provisional and by the fleeting.”*¹⁴

This is linked as well with the growing importance of the Internet. This is a fabulous tool, not only allowing us to get access to all possible news and topics, but also giving the possibility to any citizen to get his/her message across. At the same time however, it is difficult to assess the credibility of the news and to know how reliable is the source we are reading. John Paul II addressed this topic as well: *“The essence of the Internet in fact is that it provides an almost unending flood of information, much of which passes in a moment. In a culture which feeds on the ephemeral there can easily be a risk of believing that it is facts that matter, rather than values. The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are*

¹³ Message to the Catholic Union of the Italian Press, 1999

¹⁴ Apostolic Letter, “The Rapid Development”, 2005

disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity. Despite its enormous potential for good, some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all, and public authorities surely have a responsibility to guarantee that this marvellous instrument serves the common good and does not become a source of harm...Attention is rivetted on what is tangible, useful, instantly available; the stimulus for deeper thought and reflection may be lacking... Understanding and wisdom are the fruit of a contemplative eye upon the world, and do not come from a mere accumulation of facts, no matter how interesting.”¹⁵

Yet another reason for the decay of journalism is very simple: **the natural laziness of journalists**. To write a sensational piece attacking someone is easy: you seat at your computer and put it on the screen. On the other hand if you want to write about a serious matter, you have to do your home work, do intensive research and at the end, you need more skills to present this “serious” reporting in an attractive way. Laziness is pushing media people toward bad journalism. In fact it is my contention that **only professional journalism can be ethical and only ethical journalism can be professional**.

The quest for the mission of the media

Therefore the main question remains: what is the true mission of the media? How to find it back? How can we, people of the media, overcome the challenges of our time. Here, as always, John Paul II helps us: *“The problems and opportunities created by new technology, by the process of globalization, by deregulation and privatization of the media present new ethical and indeed spiritual challenges to those who work in social communications. These challenges will be met effectively by those who accept that ‘serving the human person, building up community grounded in solidarity and justice and love, and speaking the truth about human life and its final fulfilment in God were, are, and will remain at the heart of ethics in the media’ (Ethics in Communications,*

¹⁵ Message for the 36th World Communications Day, May 2002

No. 33).”¹⁶ Well, this is already quite a programme! But, of course we can find much more in the teaching of our beloved pope. Speaking in his home country he said in 1991: *“the mass media should defend freedom, but also the respect for the dignity of the person; they should support authentic culture, which is the common good of a nation, express its dignity and greatness and for that reason is of utmost importance. The society must be informed honestly, in conformity with the truth and the dignity of the nation. The press, movies, radio, television, theater have to inform the public, create and protect a culture that contribute to his enlightenment and not to his weakness or destruction. They ought to be imbued by the Gospel.”*¹⁷ On another occasion the pope wrote: *“By stressing themes such as peace, honesty, life, the family, and by not giving excessive importance to negative facts, they can help establish a new humanism that opens the doors to hope.”*¹⁸

It is true of course that John Paul II was not the first in the Church to pay great attention to the media. Paul VI had for us a great advice: *“Levate capita vestra! Heads up! Look up! This is a calling that seemingly doesn’t fit the journalists. Your trade indeed ask you to look at things from a down-to-earth and profane angle: that is to put your head down to have it at the level of the happenings you have to report about...The journalist however has an inherent duty to bring light around him and for that he must himself discover where comes from the true light on the events of this world.”*¹⁹

But we can go much farther and in fact John Paul II reminds us that *“the apostle Paul has a clear message for those engaged in communications (politicians, professional communicators, spectators), ‘Therefore, putting away falsehood, speak the truth, each one to his neighbor, for we are members one of another... No foul language should come out of your mouths, but only such as is good for needed edification, that it may impart grace to those who hear’ (Eph 4: 25, 29).”*²⁰

The fact of the matter is nevertheless that, to me at least, the most precious guidance given to the media by pope John Paul II was articulated

¹⁶ Address to the Social Communications Conferees, March 16, 2001

¹⁷ Olsztyn, June 6, 1991

¹⁸ Message to the Catholic Union of the Italian Press, 1999

¹⁹ Speech to the International Union of the Catholic Press, December 1, 1963

²⁰ Apostolic Letter “The Rapid Development”, 2005

during one of His speeches to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications when He said that the mission of the media is bring “*a genuine response to the Gospel injunction to bring "good news to the poor, liberty to captives and new sight to the blind" (Lk 4:18).*”²¹ **Good news to the poor.** Yes, a necessary part of what the media should do is to fight for social justice. This is part of our Christian call for the respect of the dignity of the human person. **Liberty to captives.** One mission of the media should be to fight against all kind of oppression. Media and Freedom. They go together. Not only the freedom from tyranny, from authoritarianism, but also from the power of the State or the power of money. But more important than the “freedom from” is the “freedom to”. The freedom to build together, inspired by our media, a new covenant. **Sight to the Blind.** Our mission in the media is indeed to give the people everything they need to understand what is happening around them. They should not be blind anymore to the world around us, but be able to make up their own mind. We should add to this that if the people should not be blind they should also not be voiceless. Therefore another calling for the media, according to Matthew: “*what I say to you in the darkness, speak in the light; what you hear whispered, proclaim on the housetops*”²², is to be the voice of the voiceless. Should we try to be faithful to this calling, to our true mission?

I must confess to you that I was very privileged to start to work as a journalist under the guidance of a great man of the media, Hubert Beuve-Mery, the founder of “Le Monde”. From the start, he told me: “*to work in the media should be a calling; we should never forget that our mission is twofold: to be a pillar of democracy and to bring people together*”. He explained that we are not here to tell the people what they should think, but to enable them to make up their own mind. We are here to serve. In fact in a profound way a journalist is always a civil servant and all media are always public media.

“*Something happens, use to say Beuve-Mery, your first duty is to give the facts: What? Why? Who? Where? When? But it's not enough. Find the historical, economic, social, etc. sources of this event or situation. Then tell your reader, listener, viewer, what various persons or parties suggest to do about it, and then, my friend, your reader will have everything he/she needs to*

²¹ Address to Social Communications Conferees, March 16, 2001

²² Mt. 10:27

make up his/her own mind and be a citizen, and then, my friend, we will live in a democracy". For him our role was to give our audience **not only what they want to get, but what they need to know.**

Our second mission, which is a blessing, a joy, a privilege, is to write about the "other", the other people, the other culture, the other religion, the other way of life, and bring all that to our readers back home. So, we are bringing people together. We allow them to know each other, to understand each other, to respect each other.

Therefore the role of the media is **to move from information to inter-formation, from understanding to mutual understanding.** We are a pillar of democracy and we are aiming at building a new covenant in the world.

The media and the civilization of love

This is of course a calling for Christian people in the media, but by all means not for them alone. This is a calling for all people, who cherish spiritual values, no matter where they get them from, for all people of good will. We have to learn from each other. As a matter of fact, as wrote Saint-Exupéry: "to love is not to look at each other, it is to look together in the same direction". Indeed, when in May 1999 I had- with the founder of "The international Communications Forum", Bill Porter- the great privilege to speak to the Holy Father and when I said that we have in our organization a few agnostics but mostly people of faiths, of all faiths on earth, He was very happy and said: "Ok! That's very good, that's the way it should be!"

Indeed the call for globalization, not of money but of heart and love, the call for the respect of the dignity of the person did not start with us. When the ICF had a media conference in India I learned a splendid poem of the Atharva Veda:

*"We are the birds of the same nest
We may wear different feathers
We may speak different tongues
We may believe in different religions
We may belong to different cultures
Yet, we share the same home, Earth*

*Born on the same planet
 Covered by the same skies
 Gazing at the same stars
 Breathing the same air
 We must learn to live together
 Or, miserably to perish together
 For, a person can live individually
 But can only survive in a community”*

And that was written 5000 years ago! What a magnificent call for the true globalisation our media should promote!

In fact, more and more media people realise that we have to change. But, as said John Paul II, “*the positive development of the media at the service of the common good is a responsibility of each and every one*”²³ It is the task of the journalists, of the media owners, but also of the public, who by reading the honest newspaper or watching the intelligent TV programme is ultimately deciding which way the media will go.

As far as we are concerned, we, in the International Communications Forum, we try to promote the true mission of the media. Just to quote a few sentences of our “***Sarajevo Commitment***”, adopted in this bruised and symbolic city in 2000, we are convinced that: “*we shall inform you to the best of our ability, with clarity and honesty, with independence of mind, of what is truly happening in the world at the level of the individual, the family, the community, the nation and the region. We shall present the facts and explain the facts, and some of us will aim with modesty to interpret them. As we succeed in doing this, we believe that you, the people, will be enabled to make the right decisions, to elect and appoint the best leaders and to build a fair, just and compassionate society.*

We seek a world in which everyone cares enough and everyone shares enough so that everyone will have enough; a world in which the work and wealth of the world are available to all at the exploitation of none...

We shall be working to raise up and not to drag down. We shall challenge our politicians to work for the next generation and not the next election... We shall work

²³ Apostolic Letter, “The Rapid Development”, 2005

to educate, through all the means of communication, generations who will be able to confront the challenges of their age with competence and vision.

We shall combine freedom with responsibility, talent with humility, privilege with service, comfort with sacrifice and concern with courage. We realise that change in society begins with change in ourselves...

We shall not cease to strive until every gun is silent, every injustice righted and every human being enabled to live a life of satisfaction and purpose”.

Let me tell you that it was a great encouragement for us to get during the mentioned audience in 1999 the blessing of pope John Paul II “for our activity”.

At the end of all this, we can reach the conclusion that our problem is not the problem of the media. Media, the first Areopagus of modern times, as said John Paul II, are but a part of the broad picture. Our fight to restore the dignity of the media, to have media fulfilling their mission, serving the people, being a pillar of democracy and mutual understanding between people is only a part- and it was certainly seen as such by John Paul II- of our global fight to build the civilisation of love, to move from the civilization of materialism, hedonism, consumerism, hatred and violence to the civilization of respect for the human person, the civilization of life, yes the civilization of love.

We are facing now a time of great crisis (not only a financial crisis or even an economic crisis but a crisis of civilization) that may work like a catharsis, that may paradoxically give us a great opportunity for change. Pope Benedict XVI just said during the General Audience that we, the faithful, want “*to see the end of this unjust world*” and added: „*of course we don’t want to witness now the end of the world. On the other hand however we do want the end of this unjust world. We also want that this world change profoundly, that starts a civilisation of love, that comes a world of justice, peace, without violence and hunger.*”²⁴

Indeed I may repeat: the call for honest media, at the service of the dignity of the people, is but a part of our call for the civilisation of love. This is- following the teaching of pope John Paul II- our task for the XXI century, it is the task of the new generation, it is **your** magnificent, enthusiastic task. I have no doubt: you will stand up to it!

²⁴ November 12, 2008