

Communio et Progressio, 40 Years

Commemorating the 'Magna Charta' of Church-communication in Asian Perspective

Franz-Josef Eilers, svd

On June 3, 1971, a new document on social communication was presented by Gordon G. Cardinal Gray (Edinburgh) to journalists at the Vatican Press Hall. The document was the pastoral instruction for social communication "Communio et Progressio" officially dated May 23, 1971. The instruction was demanded by the Vatican II Decree on Social Communication, "Inter Mirifica" (1963) saying: "The Council expressly directs the Commission of the Holy See to publish a Pastoral Instruction, with the help of experts from various countries to ensure that all principle and rules of the Council on the means of social communication be put into effect" (no. 23).

The background to this is the fact that the Council Fathers were originally presented with a document of 114 paragraphs which they felt would go beyond their own knowledge of the field. They, therefore, proposed a document with the essentials – the now Inter Mirifica decree – with only 24 paragraphs to be extended for practical use through a Pastoral Instruction and to be elaborated by the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications with the help of experts.

The new document, however, could be only published some seven years after Inter Mirifica. This long interval can be interpreted as an indication of a serious and thorough production process participated in especially by professional Catholic media organizations together with additional experts.

The first draft of "Communio et Progressio" was proposed by the Jesuit communications expert, Fr. Enrico Baragli, from "La Civiltà Cattolica," who prepared it in cooperation with other experts. This document had some 300 pages and was written in Latin. The first draft was re-worked by French sociologist and journalist, Josef Folliet, and also translated it into Modern English. Folliet

considered the material to be a kind of handbook for media use by the Church. He was able to re-phrase the original draft into modern language but still produced a relatively lengthy second draft with some 164 plus single-spaced pages.

This second draft was again re-worked and shortened to some 55 pages after some 800 proposed changes were incorporated, discussed and re-worked with experts in a five-day *clausura* in Nemi near Rome.

This then led to a fourth draft of the document which was finalized into a fifth version and sent to all bishops of the world for their final comments, before Pope Paul VI gave his approval through a hand-written letter on January 21, 1971 for the final publication of such a *Instructio Pastoralis ad Decretum Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II de Instrumentis Communicationis Socialis rite applicandum de Mandato ejusdem Concilii Exaratum*. "We willingly give our approval to the Pastoral Instruction," the Pope wrote, "and order that it be properly published. We are pleased with the long, laborious and prudent preparation of this important text and hope that with God's help it will serve the high and many purposes for which it was conceived and written."

On May 24, 1971 the president of the *Pontifical Commission for Social Communication*, Msgr. Martin J O'Connor sent a letter to all bishops of the world to introduce the new document and ask them to distribute it in their dioceses. He called it "another proof for the interest of the Church in a renewed pastoral initiative" in the field of Press, Radio, TV and Cinema "and other means of Social Communication." It has to be "translated" by and in the local churches. This way the Church should recover delays in this field over a longer period of time.

With such a preparation and investment of time and people, one could expect a work which is different from all other Church documents on Social Communication what "Communio et Progressio" really is up till today. It is still considered the most professional and best document on social communication of the Church and beyond. This is not changed but rather confirmed by the follow up Pastoral Instruction, "Aetatis Novae", some 20 years later (1992) which was

published as a continuation of “*Communio et Progressio*” and even Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Letter, “*Rapid Development*” (2005), the last document of his life which builds to quite an extent on “*Communio et Progressio*.” It was originally foreseen for the 40th anniversary of “*Inter Mirifica*.”

Content and Approach

Unlike “*Inter Mirifica*,” which still stresses the right of the Church to use the modern means of communication but also the need to secure their proper use in perspective of morality, “*Communio et Progressio*,” starts with the unity and advancement of humans as the main purpose for any communication. It is only in the third part of the document (nos. 102-180) that the contribution of Catholics to the field is discussed.

Communication in Human Society

The second main part of the document treats the contribution of communication to human progress (nos. 19-100). Here, not only the contribution of the “classical” media are discussed like the role of Press, Radio, TV or Film but rather a more general view is taken in the spirit of the new expression of *social* communication, which the Second Vatican Council had proposed. Beyond the media, it refers to *all* ways and means of communication in human society. Thus, “*Communio et Progressio*” starts to treat the contribution of communication with their role in human society which includes public opinion, as well as especially the right to be informed and to inform which is expressed in the freedom of communication (nos. 19-47) where the document says:

- “If public opinion is to be formed in a proper manner, it is necessary that, right from the start, the public be given free access both to the sources and channels of information and be allowed freely to express its own views. Freedom of opinion and the right to be informed go hand in hand. Pope John

XXIII, Pope Paul VI and the Second Vatican Council have all stressed this right to information which today is essential for the individual and for society in general.” (no. 33)

- This right to information is inseparable from freedom of communication. Social life depends on a continual interchange, both individual and collective, between people. This is necessary for mutual understanding and for cooperative creativity. When social intercourse makes use of mass media, a new dimension is added. Then, vast numbers of people get the chance to share in the life and progress of the community. (no. 44)
- This *freedom of communication* also implies that individuals and groups must be free to seek out and spread information. It also means that they should have free access to the media. On the other hand, freedom of communication would be more to the benefit of those who communicate news rather than for the good of those who receive it, if this freedom existed without proper limits and without thought of those real and public needs upon which the right to information is based. (no. 47)

Proper education in the use of media is requested but also their role in deepening and enriching contemporary culture has to be recognized, because “everyone has a right to this enrichment.” (no. 50) The importance and role of “traditional folk arts” with their stories, plays, songs and dance “express an ancient and national inheritance.”

The document underlines the role and potential of communication for *entertainment* which “need not lack cultural validity” and even the modern media can serve this need in offering “true recreation in the fullest sense of that word – to more and more people” because also “simple entertainment has value of its own” (no. 52) and communicators should readily care “about the well-being of culture.” (no. 53)

Here, also the importance of *artistic expressions* is mentioned which should be “highly appreciated” because “beauty ennobles the mind that contemplates it” and can “make spiritual reality immediate by expressing it in a way that the senses can comprehend” which is “not only a cultural benefit but a moral and religious one as well.” (no. 55)

The whole field of *advertising* is given a special section in its positive role offering “real social benefits” (no. 59) without overlooking the negative effects and harm which can be done (nos. 59 ff.)

The importance of *Media Education* as understanding “the basic principles governing the working of the media in human society” is declared as “clearly necessary for all: if their character and function is understood, the means of communication genuinely enrich man’s minds.” (no. 64) This is also an important educational concern for the family because “it is never too early to start encouraging in children artistic taste, a keen critical faculty and a sense of personal responsibility based on sound morality. Generosity and idealism are admirable qualities in young people, so are their frankness and sincerity,” which have to be “fostered from an early age.” (no. 67)

Opportunities and obligations of *communications in human society* are treated extensively in this part of the document (nos. 73-83) as well as their position within social and public societies. Public authorities “have the essential duty of maintaining freedom of speech and of seeing that the right conditions exist for it” (no. 84). The chief task of civil authorities, *Communio et Progressio* says, is “not to create difficulties or to suppress...” (no. 86) and for this also proper laws have to be provided. (no. 87 ff.)

In all this, there is a special call “to a concerted effort on the part of all who believe in the living God” (no. 96) and a special challenge for proper collaboration which could result also in “joint programs of action.” (no. 100)

Christian/Catholic Communication

The role of Christians in communication is extensively treated only in the third main part of “*Communio et Progressio*” (nos. 100-180) including their commitment to the individual media (nos. 135 ff.) which cover not only the so-called mass media of press, cinema, radio and TV but also theater (nos. 158-161) as “one of the most ancient and lively forms of human expression and communication” (no. 158).

The special contribution of Catholics in their service to communication is seen in “the spiritual sphere” from where the role of the communicator as well as the recipient is better understood. (no. 102) “Communicators have the right to expect the kind of spiritual help that meets the “special needs of their important but different role.” (no. 104) In fact, the Church should be “willing to undertake a dialogue with all communicators of every religious persuasion.” (no. 105)

The role of proper *formation and education* of the members of the Church especially bishops, priests and religious as well as laity is a special concern, which is developed over five sections of the document (nos. 106-112), and also the role of Catholic universities and educational institutions in the promotion of scientific studies and research on social communications in especially underlined. (no. 113)

There is a special role for *public opinion* also within the Church (no. 14f.) and “Catholics should be fully aware of the real freedom to speak their minds” which stems “from a feeling for the faith and from love.” Here, also those in “authority in the Church will take care to ensure that there is a responsible exchange of freely held and expressed opinion among the People of God...” (no. 116) and a “free dialogue within the Church does no injury to her unity and solidarity. It nurtures concord and the meeting of minds by permitting the free play of the variations of public opinion.” (no. 17)

The potential of modern communication for *evangelization* is listed (no. 126) but also the importance of a communication dimension of any *pastoral ministry* (no. 134) which is later further developed in “Aetatis Novae” building on the considerations of “Communio et Progressio” on planning and organization (nos. 162-180). Here again, the need for National Offices for Social Communication of Bishops’ conferences, but also for dioceses (no. 174) is repeated, which was already demanded by “Inter Mirifica” (no. 21). Originally, a similar call was already made for film in the Encyclical, *Vigilanti Cura* (1936), of Pope Pius XI. The position of a *spokesperson* for Bishops’ conferences as well as dioceses for proper Public Relations is introduced. “Communio et Progressio” also lists the roles and obligations of Catholic professional organizations (no. 178f.)

The authors of “Communio et Progressio” are also aware of the document’s limits. It shows their wisdom and foresight when they state that theirs is not the final word, but changes in the ways of communication are to be expected and that “those who are responsible for pastoral planning must stay flexible and be always willing to try to keep pace with new discoveries in this field.” (no. 183) For this it is also especially needed to concentrate on “a rigorous program for scientific research.”

The document assures that “for her part, the Church wishes to let researchers know how eager she is to learn from their work in all these areas and to follow up its practical conclusions” which probably has not happened much yet since 1971. In fact, the document underlines also the need “to discover through scientific research the true effectiveness of the Church in the field of social communication” (no. 187) which still has to be seen.

Theology

“Communio et Progressio” is the first Church document with some theological reflections in ten sections after the general introduction (nos. 6-16). Here, the considerations start with

positioning social communication as “indispensable to the smooth functioning of modern society and a Christian vision of humans as being called to “possess and master the world.” (Gen. 1:26-28; Gen. 9:2-3; Gaudium et Spes no. 34) The ability of humans to communicate is based on the fact that God has given them a “share in His creative power,” called to build with his fellow humans the “earthly city” because thus, he multiplies contacts within human society and deepen social consciousness.” (no. 7) In Christian understanding, “the unity and brotherhood of people are the chief aims of all communication” which find their source and model in the mystery of Trinitarian communication between Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.” (no. 8)

The unity and ability to communicate between people was destroyed by sin but was re-established in Jesus Christ, the “Incarnate Son, the Word and Image of the Invisible God” : as the “only mediator between the Father and humankind; He made peace between God and humans and laid the foundations of unity among humans themselves.” (Ad Gentes no. 3) The role of Jesus Christ as a communicator is then described in the following words:

“While He was on earth Christ revealed Himself as the Perfect Communicator. Through His ‘incarnation,’ He utterly identified Himself with those who were to receive His communication and He gave His message not only in words but in the whole manner of His life. He spoke from within, that is to say, from out of the press of His people. He preached the Divine message without fear or compromise. He adjusted to His people's way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And He spoke out of the predicament of their time.” (no. 11)

From here, it becomes clear that communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotions and “Communio et Progressio” continues to give a very deep and not any more paralleled definition of social communication as “*giving of self in love.*” From here, the text refers to the Eucharist as *the* expression of this “giving of self in love.” “Christ gave us the most perfect, most intimate form of communion between God and humans possible in this

life and out of this the deepest possible unity between people and God.” (no. 11) Thus, in Christian Theology, social communication is integrated in the Trinity and is exemplified in the Eucharist and in the “life giving Spirit who brings all together in unity.” (no. 11)

From these roots the purpose of communication is to develop and maintain social relations between people “during their pilgrimage on earth,” which should lead to justice and peace and finally, communion. A true interpretation of the dignity of man is based on these principles based in Incarnation and Redemption as governing any communication. (no. 15)

In Christian understanding, any communication should be judged by the contribution it makes to the common good (no. 16) and therefore has essential requirements like “security, honesty and truthfulness” : “The moral worth and validity of any communication does not lie solely in its theme or intellectual content. The way in which it is presented, the way in which it is spoken and treated and even the audience for which it is designed - all these factors must be taken into account.” (no. 17)

“Communio et Progressio” in Asia

Soon after the publication of “Communio et Progressio,” the Pontifical Commission for Social Communication initiated steps for the implementation of the document. As Monsignor Andrea Ma. Deskur, the that time secretary of the Pontifical Commission and later its president wrote in 1972: “The most important on this document is its pastoral dimension. It is concerned about Christ, his Word and his people and even those outside the Church. It is concerned about the mission of Christians and the way they use the means of their time to fulfill this mandate. Now it is important to take all necessary and possible steps for a quick and efficient realization of the Instruction in all areas and activities of the Church. “Communio et Progressio” should not gather dust in libraries but should become a stimulant and catalyst for ministry.”

With this statement in a foreword on a German publication on “*Communio et Progressio*” (Eilers, 1972, 9), he also reports that the Pontifical Commission had started “energetic steps” to “create those structures which were proposed and even demanded by the document” and he adds that “some encouraging progress” can be noted already that time in many countries. He was referring to continental meetings on the implementation of the Pastoral Instruction which the Commission had initiated. The purpose of those continental meetings, according to Deskur, is to bring those who are responsible for communication together for “joint study and consultation to not only speak on the common problems but more positively to look for ways and means for a more close and realistic cooperation.”

Within some five to six years, the Commission expected to have covered the whole world, starting with Latin America to be followed by Africa with a meeting in Ibadan, Nigeria (Nov 28-Dec 2, 1973), followed by Asia on Aug 1-2, 1974 in Tokyo, Japan and Oceania, in Palmeston North, New Zealand on Feb 20-26, 1978. These continental meetings were all under the leadership of Msgr. Deskur. Even after he suffered a stroke which partly paralyzed him in mid-1978, the continental meetings continued with a conference for Europe in Schoenbrunn, Switzerland in 1983.¹

The meeting for Asia took place in Tokyo after preparatory regional meetings in other parts of the continent like Sri Lanka and Hong Kong. The participants of that “Pan-Asian meeting of Episcopal Conferences for Social Communication” have divided their recommendations (cf. Eilers, 2009, 345-357) after an Introduction into: (1) Structures, (2) Finances, (3) Audio-visual and Cinema, (4) Press, (5) Radio and Television, (6) Media Education. The Introduction and first part of the document refers in a special way to the role of then newly established “Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences” (FABC) with the celebration of their first General Assembly in April of the same year (1974) in Taipei, Taiwan on Evangelization.

¹ The resolutions of the African, Asian and Oceanian meetings are available in full text as an appendix to Eilers (2009, pp. 345-362)

Already there the representatives from 15 bishops' conferences of Asia have stated: "No one today needs to be told of the influence and importance of the media or social communications for effectively proclaiming God's Word to our peoples. We, therefore, wish to make it our urgent collegial concern as Asian Bishops to place them more fully at the service of evangelization, education and development of our peoples." (FABC's "For All the Peoples of Asia," vol. I, 17)

This is followed by a special FABC recommendation (no. 10):

- (a) "That mass communication be given a higher priority than before by the various episcopates in the allocation of material and human resources, considering its vital importance an instruments for evangelization, and
- (b) That Catholic institutions offering courses in Mass Communication be urged to give their Catholic students and trainees adequate theological formation to go with the techniques of Mass media, and conversely,
- (c) That basic training in the principles and methods of mass communication be part of seminary studies in preparation for their ministry in a world so profoundly influenced by communication in its myriad modern forms."

These recommendations are quoted at the beginning of the Tokyo document which "wholeheartedly and without reserve" accepts these recommendations which are further underlined by the fact that only 2 percent of the Asian populations are Christians, and even these cannot even be reached through pulpits, hospitals or schools alone. Mass media are seen as the "most effective way in which Christianity can be brought to the millions of Asia; they are a proven means of human development which is our most pressing need in Asia." Therefore the FABC recommendations, according to the Tokyo conference, are "to be taken seriously and implemented at the grassroots level, *now!*" (345f.)

As to *permanent structures* proposed for Asia, diocesan offices for social communication as well as national offices are to be established along with the “Office for Social Communication” of the FABC. For the latter, it is said that it is “of special importance to us that the secretariat of the FABC Office of Social Communication be fully established!” Further, regional cooperation and collaboration of national offices is proposed. The need for trained personnel is underlined.

The importance for a two-way flow of information in Asia and about the Asian Church is recognized and the FABC office was asked to make a feasibility study. Finally, the celebration of “World Communication Day” as introduced by “Inter Mirifica” is listed as an occasion “to honor the professionals in the media to encourage their cooperation, to educate the faithful and develop enthusiasm for the apostolate.” It would be also an occasion to “develop a sense of local responsibility and to help support the local apostolate.”

For the *finances*, the contribution of funding agencies and the Propagation of the Faith are recognized and appreciated but also the need for local funding and proper communication planning. For the different media, starting with audio-visual and cinema the establishment of continental structures of the international media organizations (OCIC, Unda and UCIP) is listed but also the importance of locally existing cultural forms like storytelling and music, puppetry, shadow plays and “numerous forms of dance dramas” (Eilers, 2009, 350f.).

For the *press*, beside others, local language publications are recommended but also the need for an Asian Catholic news service is again underlined. *Radio* has “transformed Asia, even the remotest villages,” which gives it a special force. Therefore, also Catholic programs “should be certain to bring the full Gospel to bear on all aspects of human life, both temporal and eternal, both material and spiritual.” Training, production and transmission are considered as rich “opportunities for ecumenical cooperation among Christian churches.” (353) A special role is foreseen for Radio Veritas (Asia) for local cooperation and especially to fulfill “the need so emphatically repeated in our regional Asian meetings, for news of the continent and for world news, properly explained and interpreted” (355) Referring to a special section in “Communio et

Progressio" (no. 11) the meeting recommends in the light of this proposal for an *integrated training of seminarians* and religious, even seminars for bishops and other professionals in the field but also media education in schools, for catechists and other pastoral activities.

For more specialized training, it is recommended that this should be done in Asia and only in "exceptional cases" outside the continent, to (1) prevent up-rooting, (2) train students in their own cultures in the Asian context, (3) to come "to grips with the problem of expressing the faith to Asians, in the language of the media."

Finally, the participants thanked the Pontifical Commission for Social Communications for calling this conference which "brought together Catholic communicators from all of Asia to live together, to share together and to plan together. It promoted mutual understanding, inspired action, united the Asian communicators with each other, and brought Asia closer to Rome!"

Looking back over some 40 years of "Communio et Progressio" in Asia, one must admit that many of the Tokyo proposals have not been fulfilled up till today. In general, there is a greater awareness of the importance of social communication and also to some extent to provide for more specialized trainings. All bishops' conferences except Japan have appointed a single Bishop to be responsible for social communication. In fact, today, the Thai Bishops' conference has even in addition a Bishop in-charge of New Media (Internet). The Catholic media organizations especially Signis are firmly established with Asian continental and country sections. In 1996, the FABC Office of Social Communication has started regular annual meetings of bishops and national secretaries for social communication in the bishops' conferences ("Bishops' Meet"). These gatherings seek to develop a sense of mutual responsibility and support but also cooperation. Every meeting has a theme and concludes with a Final Statement which should also help to develop theological and professional considerations in the field tailored to Asian needs and challenges.

Occasional “Bishops’ Institutes for Social Communication” (BISCOMs) started in 1997 with special themes of a more general importance for the continent where every interested bishop is invited. Up till now, the following fields have been treated:

- BISCOM I: **Church and Public Relations** (Singapore, 1997)
- BISCOM I.1: **Church and PR, Training-Seminar for Bishops and Bishops’ Conference Personnel** (Manila, 1999)
- BISCOM II: **Modern Communication Technologies. Challenge for the Church in Asia** (Bangkok, 1999)
- BISCOM II.1: **Training Session on Modern Communication Technologies** (Bangkok, 2001)
- BISCOM III: **Social Communication Formation for Priestly Ministry and Mission** (Samphan, 2001)
- BISCOM IV: **E-Generation, the Communication of Young People in Asia. Challenge for the Church** (Pattaya, 2002)
- BISCOM V: **Interreligious Dialogue as Communication** (Bali, 2004)
- BISCOM VI: **Converging Communications for Ministry in Asia. Modern Communication Technologies for the Church** (Bangkok, 2007)
- BISCOM VII: **Social Communication in Catholic Universities of Asia: Facts, Experiences, Challenges** (Bangkok, 2009)

In two of these BISCOMs on new media, the participants had even a possibility for hands-on training in Internet use. Also, these conferences conclude with final statements (“Orientations and Recommendations”) which are published in a book on “Church and Social Communication in Asia” (Eilers, 2008) and also through the FABC website (cf. www.fabc.org).

The need for an Asian News Agency has been fulfilled by a private initiative in the creation of The “Union of Catholic Asia News” (UCANews), “South Asian Religious News” (SAR News), and “AsiaNews” of the PIME Fathers. The integration of social communication in seminary training is only very sporadic and not yet sufficiently developed in an organized way. Some groups of Signis have given special courses but they are not part of the regular seminary curriculum, which was demanded by “Communio et Progressio” (no. 111), saying that it should be “an integral part of their ordinary education,” which is almost nowhere the case up till now.

In 2001, a special academic program for MA and also a Roman Licentiate in social/pastoral communication was initiated at the 400-years-old “Royal and Pontifical University of Santo Tomas” (UST) Graduate School and Theological Faculty in Manila. Till 2011, the program has produced some 20 graduates with a degree of “Master of Arts in Theology – major in Social/Pastoral Communication” (MAT-SPC) at the Graduate School. Some of these graduates have acquired an additional Roman Licentiate in Pastoral Theology (STL) at the university’s Faculty of Theology. This program includes a theological foundation (communication theology), spirituality and communicative dispositions for ministry beyond the use of media (cf. <http://graduateschool.ust.edu.ph/>, and <http://www.freinademetzcenter.org/>)

The implementation of “*Communio et Progressio*” depends also today very much on the openness and flexibility of the bishops’ conferences in appointing the proper persons, following up the FABC proposals and adjusting to local needs and cultures in a professional way. This includes theology, spirituality and proper Christian and Human formation to develop communicative persons and not just “technocrats” or “techno-freaks” for one or the other medium or initiative.

After 40 years, “*Communio et Progressio*” for Asia can be seen as a beginning but the house to build is by far not that much developed and constructed as it was foreseen in Rome and Tokyo some 40 or 36 years ago. Much has still to be done especially also in view of media convergence and new technical developments in cyber-communication including the possibility of “e-vangelism.”

The Pastoral Instruction not only aims at media specialists but the communication dimension of *all* pastoral ministries, which means that every member of the Church must be a “communicative person.” This was the case at the times of the Acts of the Apostles, and the reason why Christianity has spread throughout the whole world already those days.

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