

Christian Communication Challenges of a 'New Culture'

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1. Historical Background

An overview of the history of social communication of humankind shows some developments and shifts which determined the life of many generations. The first one was the move from oral culture to writing at the early stage of human history. Without writing no experiences and ideas could be preserved and passed on to later generations. Over centuries this writing and copying of texts did hardly change and with Christianity becoming public under Emperor Constantine, copying was done in monasteries which mostly also kept the libraries.

The second and most important step in the development of the means of communication came with the invention of movable letter for printing by Johannes Gutenberg. This was indeed a major shift not only in communication technology but in the further development of human thinking like in philosophy and theology. For the first time, this way:

1. The same texts became easily available to everyone. The same form (and text) could be multiplied as many times as wanted or needed. Thus, from the single copied text suddenly plenty were available.
2. These texts were identical with the original and not altered or changed by any copying mistake by hand. Thus, for the first time in the history of the Church unified texts for liturgy became available which led e.g. to the unified missal of Pope Pius V. Before, there were many local liturgies which could be unified with this printing method promoting the liturgy of the city of Rome for the universal Church.
3. The new printing method also paved the way for more easily sharing new ideas in theology. It was this method which helped Martin Luther and his companions in a special way to spread the Reformation without the Catholic Church realizing at that time the 'copernical' change in communication technology. This can be exemplified by a few data:
 - From an average of some 40 new book titles a year in 1500 (before the Reformation!), this changed to 111 titles in 1519 (two years after the Reformation!) and 498 in 1523, 418 of them from Protestant origin.
 - Luther's "Sermon on Indulgence and Grace" was reprinted 12 times in 10 months from March 1518 onwards. The text had 25 editions within the first two years.
 - Luther's discussions with Eck in 1518 sold 1,400 copies within a few days at the Frankfurt Trade Fair the same year.
4. With the new invention a completely new profession was born, the printer. Printing and publishing became a business. It was not any more in the hands of the monasteries and monks but run by professionals to make money and to develop their business. It is indicative that the first printer in England, William Caxton, started his press 1476 in London at Fleet Street the quarter of the clergy who were the only ones who could read and write those days.

5. It is mainly with the new method of printing that new developments in thinking in philosophy and theology became spread. With the greater availability of books and printed material and a lower price through more developed techniques slowly also other groups of people had access to printed material. This was further promoted after the obligation for schooling to learn to read and write was introduced by different countries after the French Revolution (1789). Newspapers and periodicals became available to ordinary people beyond the “upper class.” Thus, the “market” grew bigger and bigger far beyond books...

In the further development of communication technologies new means are added with Film (1895), Radio (1906) and Television (1940s). These developments add with video and sound to the communication possibilities. An important moment in the development of these possibilities is the invention of the transistor by Bell Laboratories (1947) which made Radio and even Television more easily available on very small devices and without the need for complicated technology. Computers and Internet add to a further development towards Cyberspace and Virtual Reality which brings us, in the words of Pope John Paul II, into a “New Culture”.

2. Church Reactions

How did the Church in the past react to such communication developments? For the time after Gutenberg it seems to be obvious that the Church was not sufficiently aware of the many new possibilities. And when finally the Council of Trent tried to settle the issues raised by the Reformation, it was the *Index of Forbidden Books* which was initiated towards the end of the Council and promulgated two years later. While, on the one hand, the Church was using the new technical possibilities e.g. for liturgical books and theological publications the overall attitude seems to have been rather negative as reflected e.g. in the Encyclical *Christianae Republica* of Clement XIII (1766) stressing the dangers of anti-Christian writings.

This changed with Pius XI’s Encyclical on film (*Vigilanti Cura*, 1936) and Pius XII’s on electronic media (*Miranda Prorsus*, 1957) as well as Vatican II’s *Inter Mirifica* (1963) and follow up documents like the Pastoral Instructions *Communio et Progressio* (1971) *Aetatis Novae* (1992). These documents develop basically a two-fold approach to communication: 1. to use the communication means for her own purpose and 2. the obligation for a moral judgment on their use.

With Pope John Paul II’s statement on a *New Culture* in his encyclical on Mission *Redemptoris Missio* (RM 37c), however, there seems to be a paradigm shift in the Church approach to communication. He talks about a “New Culture” which is shaped and determined by Communication and thus points to a broader perspective. He admits that “to some extent this ‘Areopagus’ has been neglected”. He demands that the Christian Message has to be integrated “into the ‘New Culture’ created by modern communications”. He points to “new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology”(No. 37c) which refers not just to one new medium to be added to existing ones but rather to a new communication situation which affects all areas of life.

These new developments in communication technology lead towards a “total” communication situation where our whole life becomes determined by the many communication possibilities and demands. Communication is instant, everywhere, anytime and converging into one means like the –

even handheld- computer. This easily leads to a ‘domination’ by these means even in our private lives with almost no room any more for privacy, personal growth and development especially in young people. Children today are born with the “mouse”. This affects their personality development including their spiritual growth.

John Paul II talks about new ways of communication, new technologies, new psychology and new languages (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37c). What are the challenges of such a situation and developments for theological thinking but also for formation, spiritual life and pastoral care? What are the new possibilities or also hindrances for the proclamation of faith? How do such developments influence or even determine our Christian communities?

There are no ready made and quick answers to these issues. They are indeed “complex” as the Pope says in the same document. But it is definitely our obligation to also theologially go deeper into these issues and to respond to the “momentum” in such a way that we do not once again miss opportunities as the Church seems to have experienced in the early years of modern printing. We need a thorough research and study program for this new situation which seems not yet to be sufficiently around nor in our teaching, nor in research programs.

The political developments with *Jihad* and extreme religious movements should encourage us in addition, to go deeper and be more thorough also in the formulation and vision of our formation and teaching programs.

3. “*New Culture*”

With upcoming new communication means there has always been the fear that they would replace older means. But reality has shown that new media like television against radio have complemented rather than substituted each other. With the new means coming up in Internet and cyberspace we might expect something different, however: We are living in a time of converging communication. All existing means converge more and more into one means like the computer. Newspapers are presented and read online, radio and television broadcasts come through the Internet and even full feature films can be watched on the Net without going to the cinema any more.

Further developments seem to point to the fact that soon all means of communication will be available on our handset and also the programming will be left to the recipient which is the case already in ‘Podcasting’. The recipient becomes her/his own editor and composes his/her own program. It seems that our communication will therefore be more relying on program providers than radio or television stations or even newspapers. This has tremendous consequences for our communication structures including the different commercial or government entities. What do such developments mean for the Church and the Christian community, for theology and pastoral communication?

1. One consequence from such a development could be to concentrate more on persons than on hard- or software of communication means. Despite technical developments it will always be people who are to be responsible and finally determine the content and use of different communication means. This holds as well for the “production” side as for the recipients. On the one hand, we have to encourage creativity and ideas in developing human and Christian

“messages.” On the other hand, also the recipients have to be enabled to use the offers of the communications “industry” in such a way that they support the growth of persons and human communities.

For teaching and research of communications at the university level, this means an activity in at least two directions: To enable program producers not only in their use of technology but also in their way of determining and developing content and a proper presentation. This would be somehow the ‘active’ dimension. At the same time, for receiving such communications and to apply them to their needs and possibilities the recipients need a proper formation. Thus, the question for a pastoral minister would be: How can I use best the new opportunities for my pastoral ministry, my role as a shepherd to the people entrusted to me? How can Christ shine through all these new means in such a way that He is not only recognized but lived in a deeper and proper way? At the same time: How can I encourage people to a discriminate and responsible ‘use’ of all their new communication possibilities?

2. This “New Culture” further needs a more thorough study in itself as to the different possibilities and consequences for the mission of theology and the Church. If all the consequences from the invention of Gutenberg would have been reflected and studied in those days and applied accordingly historical developments like the Reformation but also the many misunderstandings created those days could have been avoided. The renewal of the Church would not have needed a bold step like Luther’s who felt that he was not to be listened to sufficiently. He in fact had had a just and genuine concern.

In our present situation questions like the following must be asked and answered as a first step not only on the theological but also human level:

- How is a child who today is almost born with the “mouse” conditioned in his/her further growth and communication abilities?
- How can such a child be disposed for spiritual and faith formation?
- What kind of faith formation can be “transmitted” by the new technical means and which one’s not?
- What are the qualities needed for a formator (parents, teachers) to really implant faith in a new technology-conditioned young person?
- How can a living faith experience with and beyond cyberspace be shared and implanted into another person?
- Can faith experience really be transmitted or shared in a new communication environment and with new communication means?
- We are developing into a “total” communication environment meaning to say, we will be able to communicate everywhere, anywhere at anytime. What does this mean for our privacy, our time and the uniqueness of the other person? What does this mean for our own and other religious communities?
- How can and must we re-think and possibly re-write our communication ethics and moral theology in the light of latest communication developments?
- How far does the “New Culture” help or hinder our mandate to share our faith with others beyond Church boundaries? (Evangelization and Re-evangelization?)

3. John Paul II talks in *RM* about “new ways of communicating, new technologies, new psychology and new languages”. How far does this call for more interdisciplinary studies and approaches in our teaching and developing theology? We should go far beyond just updating teaching methodologies (e.g. using presentation software)! How far are our students and scholars changed in their dispositions and abilities in comparison with former times? Which of these new technology, new psychology and languages are of special challenge to theological thinking, reflection and teaching?

4. *Culture*

When Pope John Paul II talks about a new *Culture* he not only means new media or new technologies. Culture is “a way of living” or as Louis Luzbetak defines “but different answers to the same basic human physical, social and ideational needs.” The Text in *Redemptoris Missio* seems to point exactly into this direction in not listing any media but rather the change and determination of modern culture through the different new ways of communicating. No human culture can respond to basic physical and especially social needs without communicating. Communication enables human beings to relate to each other and to their respective physical and social environment. Already the expression “*Social Communication*” as coined by the preparatory committee for *Inter Mirifica* of the Second Vatican Council seems to point into this direction. The commission felt that expressions like ‘Mass Media’ or ‘Media of Diffusion’ or ‘Audio-visual Means’ would not express enough that the Church is really concerned about. Therefore the expression ‘Social Communication’ was proposed to and accepted by the council (*IM 1*). This refers to *all* ways and means and areas of communication of and in human society. It responds in a special way to the social needs of every community and shapes and determines any cultural expression and especially this ‘New Culture’ of our times.

For a deeper theological and pastoral understanding of these dimensions one might – as a second step in our considerations - concentrate on two perspectives: Communication Theology and the whole field of pastoral and evangelizing communication:

1. *Communication Theology* is not only concerned about a theological view of different ways and means of communicating (“Theology of Communication”) but rather sees the whole of theology under the perspective of communication:
 - The Trinitarian God communicates within himself, Father and Son in the Holy Spirit
 - This Trinitarian God communicates with his creatures in Revelation. For this he uses all ways and means of the cultures addressed: he speaks to Adam and Eva interpersonally, but also communicates through fire and brimstone, through Moses and the prophets, through natural and manmade happenings...
 - The high point of this communication is the Incarnation of the Word of God, Jesus Christ himself: “and the word becoming flesh” (Jn 1,1 cf. Hebr. 1,1).
 - The Church finally is to be seen as the continuation of God’s communication into the here and now of every time.

With such a theological understanding and approach the instrumentality of communication becomes secondary. Rather the whole culture and life of the community are determined by different ways and means of communicating. This affects also in a special way the “New

Culture” of John Paul II. In other words: Communication Theology helps to see that communication is rather an interactive dimension in a cultural context which is deeply rooted in the Trinitarian God. It is not just the use or even the efficient use of certain media or technical means. This cultural context, however, seems today not any more to be determined by ‘eternal values’ but rather by individualism, consumerism, relativism: everything is available to everybody at any time and at the wish of the individual. If the Church in the understanding of Communication Theology is really the continuation of the communicating Trinitarian God in his revelation and incarnation how to fulfill this mission in a New Culture today?

2. The concerns of *Pastoral and Evangelizing Communication* (cf. Eilers 2004) in a new culture are reflected in a double way: a) in the inner disposition needed, and b) in the realities of the New digital Culture and their consequences.
 - a) The communication of the ‘*Shepherd*’ is determined by knowing the ‘sheep’, the ‘sheep’ knowing him and the ‘shepherd’ giving his life for them (cf. Jn 10). Here it is not technologies and skills which are demanded but rather dispositions and attitudes which have to be developed and which have to determine our approach to the “New Culture” in which people of today live. This can be said not only for the communication within the Church (*ad intra: Pastoral Communication*) but also for the communication to the outside beyond the Church boundaries (*ad extra* (‘*ad Gentes*’): *Evangelizing Communication*).

All this calls for a ‘communication culture’ or rather a ‘communicative Culture’ which is based on the inner disposition and spirituality of the participants and especially their ‘shepherds’. The “New Culture” is to become a culture where incarnation and revelation takes place in the here and now of our time in such a way that it really affects the lives and disposition of people.

- b) Our Pastoral as well as our Evangelizing Communication is embedded in a New Culture which is determined by new technical developments. At the outset we must be very clear about a new and unique situation with this “New Culture”: the Internet and new technologies are not only just a further addition to the already existing communications media like it was in the past with Film, Radio and TV. They rather change our ways of thinking, of relating, of communication in essential ways. They are not any more mere instruments but rather a complete new way of living, as Bertrand Quellet told the participants of the World Congress of the Catholic Press June 2007 in Sherbrooke, Canada. This is beside others reflected in the following ways which lead to important pastoral communication questions:
 - The digital revolution changes *our way of thinking*. We are not any more determined by logical thinking and a ‘hierarchical’ structure based on documents. We are more and more determined by a whole ‘market’ of ideas and thoughts which are more determined by emotions and experiences than logical thinking:
 - What are the consequences from this for human behavior and moral theology?
 - People are looking for experiences more than head-level thinking and presentations: What are the consequences for liturgical celebrations and Church services? Could this not be *one* reason why our churches especially in the West are becoming empty?

- The digital revolution promotes *inter-activity*. The recipient is not any more the passive person but becomes integral and active part of the communication process. S/he wants to be recognized as that:
 - What are the consequences for catechesis, community life and the pastoral approach of the minister?

- In the “New Culture” everything is available to anybody at any time. It means that the *recipient* becomes her/himself the *communicator*. S/he determines what is said, how when and where and not any more the communicator (Sender!). The recipient determines what to do. If the journalist still has a role to play it is more the one of a guide than a ‘gatekeeper’.
 - What are the consequences for our pastoral communication?

- In the “New Culture” the recipient decides what s/he wants and ‘needs’. It is fully up to the *individual to decide* when, where and with whom to communicate. With this we seem to be in the danger of losing permanent values to individualism. Everything is measured according to *my* interest or ‘needs’. *I* determine and create the world around me – possibly independent from any common rules...
 - How does such a growing individualism not to say ‘egoism’ affect our Church life and the way we approach and deal with people?
 - What does this mean for the formation of young people and how to prepare them for life and society?
 - How can community develop and exist if the individual becomes itself the norm (“I want..” “I like..”)? How can a ‘demanding’ God be part of such a life? Are there still permanent and values independent from the ones I create for myself?
 - How does such a ‘click’ and ‘zap’ Culture change especially young people? Just a click on the Net gives what one wants and gives it instantly! And if it is not immediately available you go somewhere else...

- The “New Culture” is characterized by *fragmentation and segmentation*. It is not any more the ‘great’ structure and vision of life from which one used to find directions like it is also reflected in the old and classical Church architecture. Our life becomes rather segmented and a collection of experiences which are juxtaposed and often not even related. The new digital world is not any more hierarchical and in such a way structured. It is rather a network which should be developed and connected with each other. Before Radio or TV stations were characterized by their transmitting towers and the churches by their church tower...; with digital communication this has given way rather to a collection of millions of computers without any fixed center! The ‘global Village’ becomes a ‘global Network’. The former center seems to be more and more lost.
 - What does this mean for a hierarchically determined pastoral ministry?
 - How to ‘proclaim’ and ‘implant’ in such a situation the ‘eternal truths’ of our faith?
 - How to keep the center of Christian faith and community alive in such a situation?
 - How far does such a reality foster or also distort the ‘equality’ of everybody and how does pastoral communication respond to this?

- In the ‘New Culture’ *children* become already in their very early age ‘*computer freaks*’ With two or three years they are already navigating with the ‘mouse’ on the computer screen:
 - What are the psychological dispositions created this way at a very early stage of personality development?
 - What are the consequences for integrating and introducing such young people into faith and Christian community?
 - How can the treasures of Christian faith be integrated and shared with people who might be incapable for this because they are that much determined by such a “New Culture”?
 - How can we still preserve and foster permanent Christian values and concerns?
 - How can we maintain and even strengthen the ‘eternal truths’ of Christian faith?
- The “New Culture” is determined by an incredible *cultural diversity* available more and more to everybody.
 - How can such a diversity which is also reflected in the Catholic Church be ‘translated’ into our new situation with new technologies, new ways of communicating, new languages and a new psychology? (cf. John Paul II: *Redemptoris Missio* 37c).
 - How can such diversity be integrated into a local culture and church but at the same time also be enriched in the process - also spiritually?
- All these developments and considerations do also call for a new and deeper *ethical approach*. This includes even changes in our language and how we deal with each other and respect our privacy. “What some five years ago nobody would write on an open postcard because it could be seen by everybody is today placed into the ‘blog’ of the Internet for everybody. And especially the young have no qualms about it...” (Bergmann)
 - What does all this mean for our Christian acting and our Christian responsibilities?
 - Which are the main ethical concerns to be considered, developed and clarified in a culture determined by Internet and digital design?
 - Which values are we to develop and foster in a new generation growing up and driven by these converging means of communication?

Conclusion

The “New Culture” with new ways of communicating, new technologies, a new language and new psychology demands also a theological re-thinking of our communication approaches and activities. We should learn from history and dispose ourselves to embrace the “New Culture” in the spirit of Communication Theology and a genuine spirit filled approach to modern pastoral and evangelizing communication. We should become aware of a new “Relativism” which is created and fostered by the modern converging communication culture and should take up the challenge.

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