**THE COMMUNICATION FORMATION
OF CHURCH LEADERS
AS A HOLISTIC CONCERN**
by Franz-Josef Eilers, svd

When the Jesuits, for the first time in the history of their General Congregations, drafted and approved 1995 a document on social communication, they observed that "Communication in the society has usually been considered as a *sector* of apostolic activity, a field for some specialists who often felt isolated or on the margin of the apostolic body. The society needs to acknowledge that communication is not a domain restricted to a few Jesuit professionals, but a *major apostolic dimension* for all our apostolates..."

In many church circles and religious groups in general the same observation can be made. Formation in communication is considered as a specialized training of more or less technical nature. The need to base this on a broader vision and experience where communication is a dimension of and an attitude in religious life is often missing. It is time to base the communication formation of religious leaders, especially the clergy, on a broader basis which means to go beyond mere technical training.

Theological Basis

In the Christian understanding, there is further a deeper theological reason for such an understanding and approach.

Over many years church people have asked to develop a "Theology of Communication" but it really never developed. Instead of developing another "Genitive Theology," however, one should see communication rather as a theological principle. It means that the whole of Christian theology is seen and considered under the perspective of communication. Here, Communication is not just an activity which is 'baptized' by theology. Avery Dulles, together with Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Carlo Martini, Peter Henrici and others, says that "Theology is at every point concerned with the realities of Communication" (1992, 22).

He calls the *Trinity* the "deepest mystery of communication" where "our human eyes are blinded by its surpassing brilliance. The created analogies, while falling immeasurably short, point through their convergence to the communicative character of this exalted mystery. The Trinity is communication in absolute, universal perfection, a totally free and complete sharing among equals. In generating the Son as Word, the Father totally expresses himself ..." and "the Holy Spirit completes the intradivine process of communication." Concluding, Dulles quotes Berhard Haering in saying that "communication is constitutive in the mystery of God. Each of the three divine Persons possesses all that is good, all that is true, all that is beautiful, but in the modality of communion and communication" (1992, 37 f.). Human beings reflect this inner Trinitarian communication, because they are created "in His image and likeness" and   this way are able to communicate. Haering formulates it thus: "Creation, redemption and communication arise from this mystery and have as their final purpose to draw us, by this very communication, into communion with God" and Dulles concludes: "Because Christianity is first

and foremost the religion of the triune God, it is pre-eminently a religion of communication, for God in his inmost essence is a mystery of self-communication"   (1992, 38 f.).

God's Trinitarian self-communication manifests itself in revelation and reaches its high point in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. The Church is the continuation of this self-communication into the here and now of every time and place or as Avery Dulles says: "The entire work of creation, redemption, and sanctification is a prolongation of the inner processions within the Trinity. Creation is ascribed to the Father, who thereby fashions finite images and vestiges of his son. Redemption is attributed to his Son, who communicates himself to human nature in the Incarnation. Sanctification is appropriated to the Holy Spirit who communicates himself to the Church, the communion of saints. The mystery of divine communication, therefore, permeates any area of theology". "Because Christianity is the religion of the triune God, it is pre-eminently a religion of communication."

This reality can be expressed in the following scheme [1]:
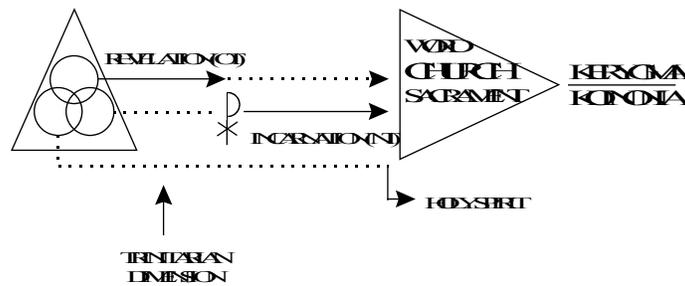
Communication Theology is concerned about the Trinitarian God, communication within Himself, communicating in revelation through creation and grace, and communicating through the incarnation of the Son. The Church is founded to continue this communication into the here and now of our time especially as community ('communio', Koinonia), proclaiming (Kerygma) and   in serving (Diakonia).

Without developing further details, at this point, it should be obvious that such a theological perspective has concrete consequences for the communication formation of church members, especially her leaders. The concern is not just the training in skills for the media but the formation of attitudes which grows from such deeper theological understanding.

Duty and Role of communication

If the Church is the continuation of God's communication through revelation and incarnation the ways and means of this communication must also be reflected in her, especially in her leaders. They are required to develop communicative attitudes which go beyond technical skills which are to be practiced and reflected on different levels and the different means of communication. .

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[1] *Franz-Josef Eilers:* **Communicating in Community, An Introduction to Social Communication**. Manila   (Divine Word/Logos) 1994. p 35.

Such a formation is practised and reflected on different levels of communication.

1. The personal communication of a Church leader must be first and foremost grounded in her/his communication with God in prayer and meditation which is finally reflected in her/his communication with others.

2. Interpersonal communication starts with the 'witness of life' of the individual and the community. What personal and public image does the Church have? How is her Public Communication/Relation? A communicative Church leader needs a certain sensitivity for this and the willingness to be available.

   The early Church and modern theology sees 'koinonia', 'communio' as basic for Christian life. Today in many countries it is especially the 'Basic Christian communities which bring life and are the centre of the Church, thus reflecting in a very concrete way this 'communio'. Here also the Eucharist must be seen and experienced as the centre of Christian communication as the Pastoral Instruction "Communio et Progessio" asserts: " In the institution of the Eucharist, 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."(No.11)

   All principles of group communication apply here. 'Homiletics' as the study and teaching of preaching but also religious instruction ('catechesis') are areas to be considered.

   Simple means of communication like newsletters and information services can be an expression of committed interpersonal communication and a service to professional communicators.

3. From the modern Mass Media, the electronic means are to quite an extent entertainment media, but bring also news and documentation. Religion and religious practices can be part of stories told, but also part of news, documentaries or the general background of any presentation.

   Press and publishing offers books, periodicals and other materials where Church leaders can share their concerns and communicate with those related to them.

4. In "multimedia" different means of communication converge into computers, the Internet and others to a unified personal experience. They are a new level of communicating with growing challenges on the availability and the flexibility of a Church leader.

All these different levels and possibilities of communication demand from Church leaders not only a certain professional knowledge but also attitudes and abilities which must be formed and secured already during formation years. We not only need e.g. introduction into the professional basics of Mass Media but also a holistic approach to communication formation where also attitudes and human as well as Christian abilities are developed in such a way that they respond to the needs and demands of our times.

Attitudes and Abilities

Such basic attitudes and abilities needed on the personal as well as the professional level.

1. **Personal level**

a) The first basic attitude on the personal level is the *openness* to God and others. A Church leader must in the final analysis reflect God himself who became flesh through his son Jesus Christ. This is only possible if s/he is grounded in prayer and has developed a personal relationship to the God s/he represents. Such an openness with God leads also to a greater openness for others, their concerns, needs and expectations.

b) *Willingness to learn and to listen* is another consequence from such openness. Only a person who is willing to listen and to learn can really communicate with others and share in their needs and expectations.

c) Only the willingness to listen and to learn finally equips the Church leader for *dialogue* and sharing.

2. Professional level

Attitudes and abilities needed on the professional level flow from the basic personal attitudes of openness and willingness to listen and learn.

Beside the basics of technical knowledge appropriate to the means to be used it is essential that a Church leader is aware of a) the situation and needs of the people he has to address, b) the communicative possibilities of the medium he wants to use, and c) the message he wants to convey.

a) Any target audience is determined through expectations and the capability for reception by culture, society and general environment. Recipients are shaped by their cultures, societal relations and perception abilities. This requires from the Church leader a sufficient knowledge and experience of these cultures. Only a Church leader who knows the emotional, cultural and professional background of his people can adequately communicate. For the electronic media, this e.g. also includes to know the program preferences of a given audience for radio, TV and film.

b) A Church leader must further know which means of communications are appropriate for a given community or situation and how to use them accordingly. This does not only refer to Mass Media but also to ways and means of behavior which are always influenced by culture and relationships.

c) Finally the Church leader must know what he really wants or is supposed to communicate. This is a challenge to his theological knowledge and experience.

Directions for Communication Formation

Communication is an essential need for *every* Church member and especially every Church leader. It is not only *one* sector of the Church's activities but it is "a major apostolic dimension of all our apostolates" as the communication document of the Jesuits' General Congregation 1995 says. This requires for the formation of Church leaders the development of --

1. Basics for a healthy communication attitude and communication ability of the whole person. It means that the *basics of human communication* have to be instilled theoretically and practically in all future ministers of the Church.

2. In a world where communication is in a growing way "unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a 'global village'" (Redemptoris Missio 37c) it is important that Church leaders receive sufficient Media Education to be able to critically assess, evaluate and also use the modern means of communication, especially the Mass Media.

3. Beside basic human communication skills, those leaders with special talents and or interests should be encouraged and promoted for further professional studies and skills training.

Such a holistic communication formation should also help towards the integration of social communication into the overall structures and activities of the Church. Often different communication activities, especially those of the Mass Media, are separate and isolated from other Church activities. The following approaches can be seen in many Church activities and structures:

Approaches to Social Communication Ministry: Planning and Activities [2]

   1. Isolation Approach
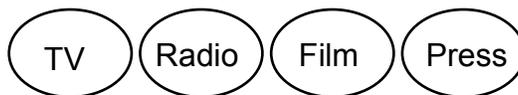
Communication office / activities work independent from each other and 'unrelated to other pastoral ministries. They are like 'little turfdoms' … press on its own, broadcasting, film, etc. each on its own. The consequences can be:
- *Possibly lack of common vision and concern*
- *Lack of collaboration, sometimes overlapping and duplication*

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[2] Based on *Angela Zukowski* "Shifting the Paradigm: Perspectives on Diocesan Pastoral Communications in the United States." In *Victor Sunderaj (Ed):* **Pastoral Planning for Social Communications**. Montreal (Paulines) 1998. pp. 94-98.

2. Unifying Approach
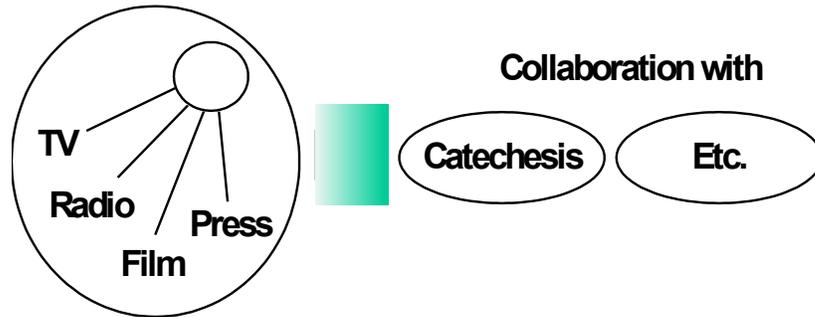
The Communication office and activities are under one umbrella e.g. one director for all different media. The different media sections are interrelated to each other. Consequences:
- *Common vision: all communication activities are supportive of each other and related to the overall mission*
- *Collaboration with other apostolates like Catechesis, Bible, etc.*
- *Effective use of limited resources*

3. Basic Collaborative Approach
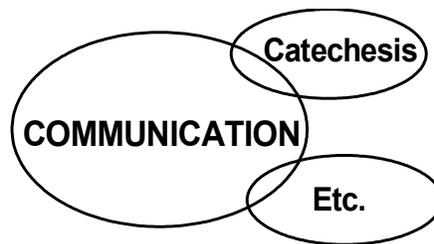
The Communication office and activities are integrated and interdisciplinary. Consequences:
- *The Communication dimension is brought into all other ministries*
- *A Quality infrastructure leads to convergence of communication technologies and convergence of ministries*

4. Integral Dimension Approach
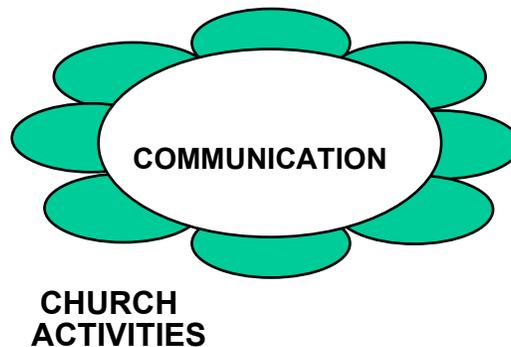
Here, Communication is seen and realized as an essential dimension of the Church at all levels. The consequences are that:

- *Communication underlies as theological principle in all Church activities*
- *There is less concern about Instrumentality of Communication (Media Dominance)*
- *Here, Communication is 'giving of self in Love' (C+P 11) on all levels and in all Church activities*

From these considerations, probably only the "integral dimension approach" is to be developed. But such a development depends very much on an overall holistic formation of Church leaders who are mutually open to each other and are able to dialogue for the good of the community.

Communication Formation Experiences

An attempt for a more holistic communication formation is made since several years at the Divine Word School of Theology in Tagaytay City, Philippines. Every student entering theological studies has in the first semester a *regular and obligatory* course 'Introduction to Social Communication.' This course stresses the dimension and basic rules of human communication, considers the theological dimensions and leads from there to the basics of Mass Media, group communication and Multimedia. Students with special interests are offered additional classes with more practical applications. In the course of further studies, beside regular classes in 'Homiletics,' other courses are offered like Pastoral Communication, Intercultural Communication, Communication Theology, and Religious Broadcasting. Beyond such courses, 'personal relations' are being developed which in a deeper way happen in regular spiritual direction, individual conferences of the formandi with the formator, as well as in group sharings and processing. The more a holistic communication formation is personalized the more effective it will be, and the more the formandus himself will experience the values of openness, and willingness to learn, listen and share.

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