FABC spirituality 2013: the Social Communication dimension.

Some considerations by Franz-Josef Eilers,svd for the annual "Bishops' Meet" 2014 in Macau.

The "Message of the 10th Plenary of the FABC" 2013 speaks about "renewed Evangelizers for a New Evangelization" who reflect 1. A personal encounter with Jesus, 2. A passion for Mission, 3. A focus on the Kingdom of God, 4. A commitment to Communion, 5. Dialogue, 6. Humble presence. 7.A Prophetic evangelizer is in 8. Solidarity with victims , 9. Cares for creation and finally 10. Reflects boldness in Faith and Martyrdom.

In speaking on the communication dimension of all this it will be good to remind ourselves first of the real meaning of "Social Communication" and on the working of the Holy Spirit in this at the second Vatican Council. During the preparation of the communication document *Inter Mirifica* for discussion at the council some people felt that there should be a new name for this text which was later explained in a footnote to the first paragraph when the final text was given to the Council fathers. There it is said that there should be a new name: instead of existing expressions like "Diffusion techniques", "Mass Media", "Publizistik" or "spectacles" this new expression should be **Instruments of *Social Communication.*** It refers in the meaning of the footnote to the "instrumental role through which a spiritual content originating from a human author is communicated." (cf. Eilers, 2014a, 145; 2014b))

This new expression was accepted by the Council and to be applied to all further documents and announcements of the Church in this field which was done since then in words but not in Spirit and apparently without any further reflection and study on the full meaning of the word. There was no further explanation of the term in the years to come. It means that after Vatican II the expression '*Social Communication'* was used but most of the times – despite the original footnote to *Inter Mirifica* - basically as identical with Mass Media. Even Fr. Enrico Baragli sj, who was the one originally proposing the new expression reverted himself in an evaluation 10 years after *Inter Mirifica* to 'Mass Media' instead of Social Communication. In a footnote he reasons that the expression *Social Communication* would be too complicated for some people and not easily understood. (Baragli 1974) Reflecting today on the proposed and accepted

expression seems to indicate that the Holy Spirit was working in this wording, especially in view of later developments in the field today with Mass Media loosing and social networks gaining: *Social Communication* refers to *all* communications of and in human society where the Mass Media are only one small part of the spectrum! In Social Communication *all* ways and means of human communication are included from intrapersonal to interpersonal, from group communication to social networks which have now become a special meaning though they do exist already since the beginning of humankind as Tom Standage has convincingly shown in his "Writing in the Wall, Social Media the first 2000 years"(2013).

To communicate means to share something with people, but also between God and people! Thus in communicating I share something of me to somebody else and within Society ("social").

Such a perspective pulls us away from the pure technology orientation of the "Media" (technical means!) to a human *process* of sharing which we stress for example in our MA/Lic.theol. academic program at the Pontifical University of Santo Tomas in Manila. Our concern is not to develop "technicians" with a "how to do" approach but rather communicative persons and people within human and Church communities. This is for example expressed in the way we deal with people and situations where we are supposed to become partners in communicating: we become one and inspire and enable each other which is finally a deep spiritual experience - the experience of the Holy Spirit. Such communication spirituality is characterized in the triple openness to God, Self and others (cf.Eilers 2009,33-40). I cannot be a good communicator to others without being connected and filled with God but also being fully aware of my own limitations and hindrances in communicating with others. Thus Social Communication is much more than Media and technology: It is the ability to openly share with others in all the different ways and means offered by my culture and society!

This has consequences not only for the communication structure of the Church but especially also for our formation programs, especially in our seminaries. There it is not just the "hands on" experience in 'using' Media with a skill orientation. It is rather a question of a solid and deeper 'Disposition" far beyond technical skills,

which is rooted in a deep and solid spirituality…Another consequence of such a view can be also the organization and structure of our diocesan and national *Social Communication* offices. In the past they were mainly structured according to different Media: Press, Broadcasting (Radio/TV), Film. In a proper *Social Communication* structure and a deeper understanding of *Social Communication* but also in view of recent developments in the field they might be organized differently as is done already in Myanmar with the following three sections: 1.Interpersonal/cultural Communication, 2. Media, 3. Social Networks. While in the first section the participants are at the same time Producers and Consumers within the communication process, they are only (passive) consumers in the second step while in the third step with social networks they are "Pro-Sumers" as the German Bishops' Conference calls them in a recent document under the heading of "Competence".

SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

Interpersonal/ cultural	(Mass) Media)	Social Networks
Producer & Consumer	Consumer	Pro-Sumer

Receiver as

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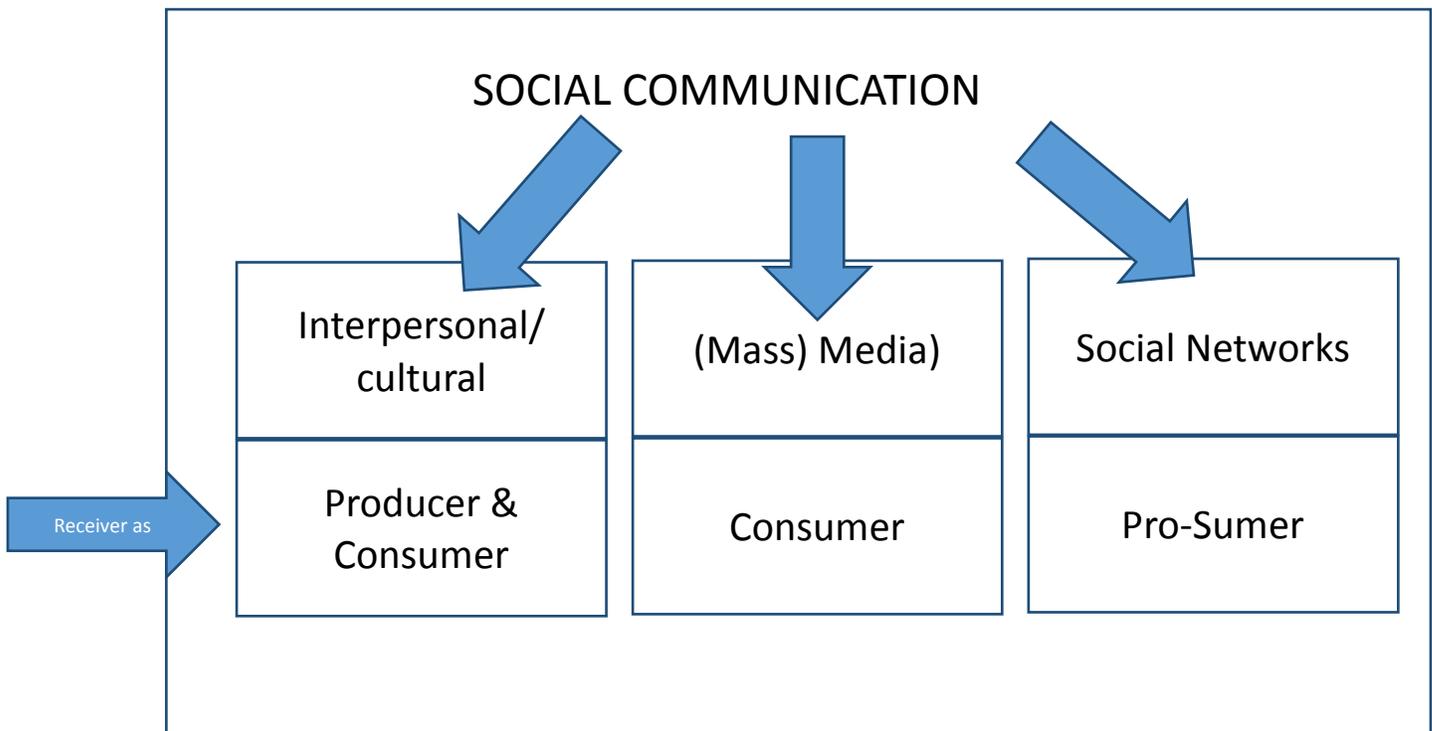
The "Message of the 10th FABC Plenary Assembly" from December16, 2013 on "Renewed Evangelizers for New Evangelization in Asia" talks about a "Personal Encounter with Jesus Christ" but also about Dialogue, Solidarity, humble and prophetic presence". All this presupposes in a special way proper *dispositions* for

communication as Pope Francis underlines many times in his *Evangelii Gaudium* (cf. Eilers, 2014b,553-566).

It is not without reason that one of the very first offices in the history of the FABC was the one on Social Communication partly also because of *Radio Veritas Asia* as the mouthpiece for the Christians in China and other Communist countries. But also in a more general way the development and nourishing of proper communicative dispositions and openness to Asian realities and cultures which stands right at the beginning of the FABC must be mentioned. They were a benchmark of all General Assemblies from 1974 to 2000: The respective themes and concerns of these assemblies were reflected in a number of special preparatory FABC papers written or organized by the different FABC offices. The same offices had also during the general assembly special study groups on the respective theme in their own perspective. All these considerations and proposals were then synchronized during the assemblies into the final statement which this way reflected in a lively way the assemblies and their inputs. In this way they also gave testimony to the thinking and experiences of the Church for "All the peoples of Asia."

This all changed with the Plenary in Daejon 2004 in Korea. There a document of some 60 pages on Family was presented and voted upon without any contribution of offices and even local conferences…. The text did not originate any more from the offices or/and the assembly but the assembly was only to comment and propose changes or additions to an already existing text which eventually became the final 'document'. This has been repeated also in Manila (2009) where the message was even published only some months after the General Assembly. Also for Vietnam (2013) a 'final' document was prepared by one person, but apparently the present 'message' added. This hopefully indicates a return to the former 'dialogic' (communicative) practice to give the churches and participants but also the FABC offices once again their own voice to let them fully participate and communicate through a proper process of *social* Communication. This hopefully will continue to stay as a 'trademark' for a communicating and 'dialoging' Church in Asia which is supposed to be a "Communion of Communities" and thus a communicating Church.

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In a recent article on Asian Christian spirituality, published in the new "Oxford Handbook on Christianity in Asia", edited by Felix Wilfred (2014) Vietnam born Peter C. Phan relates Christian spirituality in a special way to considerations of the "Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences" (FABC) on a "new way of being Church in Asia" and the 'triple dialogue' with people, especially the poor, Cultures and Religions in Asia. The communication consequences of this "new way of being Church in Asia" (Bandung 1900) were considered already by the Asian communication bishops "Bishops' Meet" (BM) 1997. In their 'final considerations' on this 'new way' which is reflected in 1. A communion of communities, 2. A participatory, 3. Witnessing and 4. Prophetic Church, they remind us that a "communion of communities" is "rooted in the life of the Trinity". This consideration, however, goes already back to 1982 when it was described in more detail at the FABC General Assembly in Bangkok at the 10th anniversary of the official foundation of the Federation (Rosales/Arevalo 50 f.) in saying that the " constants in the life of the communities is rooted in the communion of the Trinity being "essentially a reality of God's giving , of Grace." There the Asian bishops say that the Church is at its deepest level a communion (Koinonia) rooted in the life of the Trinity, and thus in its essential reality a sacrament ("mysterium et Sacramentum") of the loving *self-communication* of God and the graced response of redeemed mankind in Faith, Hope and Love."

The same consideration, however. is also the basis of our "*Communication Theology*" which grounds in the Trinity and studies the whole of Theology under such a perspective. It is not a "Theology *of* Communication" which somehow seems to try to 'baptize' the Media and thus adds to the many other 'Genitive Theologies'…

Graphic!

Communication Theology sees the origin of any human communicating in the Trinitarian self-communicating God, Father communicating with the Son in the Holy Spirit and it is thus also as an essential dimension of any communication Spirituality. We are able to communicate because we are created in God's "image and likeness". This communication is all embracing and not only confined to technical means (media)! It is a spirituality of communion and sharing with each other in every way and form available to human beings. This exactly is also the

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final meaning of *Social* Communication which in a Christian sense refers to *any* way of communicating in Society. It is not first and foremost a question of means but a deep relationship with God and each other being expressed in the full triple openness not only to God but also to self and others. Theologians like Karl Rahner, Bernhard Haering, Avery Dulles, Carlo Martini, Gisbert Greshake and others have contributed much to such an understanding of Social Communication as a *disposition* and not just as a means, use or 'skills' for one technology or the other cf. Eilers 2009a, 43-62). 'Disposition', the dictionary tells us is "the predominant or prevailing tendency of one's spirit, natural and emotional outlook or mood, characteristic attitude, state of mind regarding something". What is our 'state of mind' in social communications as Christian communicators? Are we just after skills and 'use' or is there more in the invitation to "Christian Communication" and a respective spirituality?

A proper communication disposition is finally also the ground for a participatory, but also witnessing, dialoging and prophetic Church in Asia as the 'new way of being Church' requires. Are we as priests and communicators people of such a spirit or are we headmasters and 'bosses' of the faithful in their parishes and pastoral 'activities'?

The other dimension of an Asian Spirituality is *Dialogue* which was presented already in the very first Plenary assembly of the FABC 1974 in Taipei for Asia as a triple dialogue with 1. people, especially the poor, with 2. Cultures and 3. Religions.

Pope Paul VI who was beatified last October 19, is especially in his approach to Dialogue a great example of 'pastoral Communication'. His encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam* – published during the Council - is a masterpiece on this concern and is also reflected in some Vatican II documents like *Gaudium and Spes*. In his encyclical (no. 81) the Pope lists as characteristics of any Christian Dialogue as communication:

1. *Clarity*: what is said should be intelligible…"all of us should examine closely the kind of speech we use. Is it easy to understand? Can it be grasped by ordinary people? Is it current idiom?"
2. It must be accompanied by the *meekness of Christ*, who was 'meek and humble of heart': "it would indeed be a disgrace if our dialogue were marked

by arrogance, the use of bad words or offensive bitterness..” It shares “with others the gift of charity, is itself an example of virtue, avoids preemptory language, makes no demands. It is peaceful, has no use for extreme methods, is patient under contradiction and inclines towards generosity”

3. It has *confidence* not only in the power of one's word, but also in the good will of both parties in dialogue” It “promotes intimacy and friendship on both sides. It unites in mutual adherence to the good, and thus excludes all self-seeking.”

4. Finally also *prudence* is needed to allow for the psychological and moral circumstances of “the hearer, particularly if he is a child, unprepared, suspicious or hostile. The person who speaks is always at pains to learn the sensitivities of the audience” and “adapts himself and the manner of his presentation to the susceptibilities and degree of intelligence of his hearers”! All of this is essential also for any *pastoral communication* even beyond dialogue as a special form.

Such words and considerations remind me on Pope Gregory the Great with his “Pastoral Rule” from 591 which is an outstanding text on pastoral communication and priestly/episcopal spirituality. It is a document and text which seems today almost being forgotten though during the Middle Ages this ‘Rule’ was placed at the episcopal ordination together with the Bible on the head of the new bishop as a guideline for his future ministry. It is a gem in pastoral communication and high time to be re-discovered. Beside many other things Gregory compares the role of the *pastoral communicator* with the player of a harp: “The discourse of a communicator should be adapted to the character of the hearers, so as to be suited to the individual in his respective needs…For what else are the minds of attentive hearers but, if I may say so, the taut strings of a harp, which the skillful harpist plays with a variety of strokes, that he may not produce a discordant melody? It is for this reason that the strings give forth a harmonious melody, because they are not plucked with the same kind of stroke, though plucked with the one plectrum. Hence too, every communicator, in order to edify all in the one virtue of charity, must touch the hearts of his hearers by using one and the same doctrine, but not by giving to all one and the same exhortation” (Eilers, 2009a, 219!).

Any attempt for a new and fresh evangelization must be grounded on such a spirituality and communicative disposition – personal and structural – which is already expressed in the concept of *Social* Communication but seemingly not yet sufficiently understood and incorporated in our sharing with "all the people of Asia" and beyond!

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In his Encyclical Letter on Mission *Redemptoris Missio* Pope John Paul II talked already 1990 about a *New Culture* and placed the World of Communication as the "First *Areopagus* of the modern age in our time." "The very Evangelization of modern culture" he writes," depends to a great extent on the influence of the media." "It is not enough" he continues, "to use them simply to spread the Christian message" but it is also "necessary to integrate that message into the 'New Culture' created by communication… This 'new culture' originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology" (37c) This was said already almost 25 years ago but even more calls for a fresh approach and new way of presenting and living the faith. Instead we seem still somehow stuck in 'old' ways of sharing faith which also needs a proper spirituality. How far, do we for example take the situation of the "digital natives" which are our students now, serious in their 24/7 experience of Tablets and computers? I have the impression that we are often stuck in our old ways of catechesis and teaching where the 'teacher' knows everything and has 'mercy' on his students in a situation where things are rapidly changing into the other way around! How much time do for example our seminarians and even priests spend on *Facebook* in chatting nonsense instead of listening to the Lord and people longing for a deeper spiritual life…?

Brazilian Paolo Freire tried already in the 70ties of last century to develop within people a *Conscientization* which makes them aware of their own creative abilities, power and dignity to learn from 'within' instead of being submitted to the old 'banking' system of teaching. Is this not also needed in a special way for the young people today who are fed with images and 'news' almost since birth…?

Is it not that some of the basic elements indicated above still have to be realized and lived in our Asian reality? It calls for a greater inner openness of the

Evangelizer who is to reflect the Lord in his care and concern for others!
Communication spirituality lives on the permanent 'listening heart' which the
young King Salomon asked from the Lord. It also means the 'listening' to new
developments and possibilities in the way we share (communicate) and are
exposed to a world which is 24 hours open and at our doorsteps as challenge but
also a possibility for sharing faith which means 'Evangelization' in a 'new' way.

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