

## 'Inter Mirifica' after 40 Years

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The Decree on Social Communication of Vatican II *Inter Mirifica* received the biggest number of “no” votes in the final voting for any council document. This was probably due to the fact that the text was heavily criticized by communications people and some council fathers even tried a campaign at the entrance to Saint Peter’s Basilica to stop it. The original proposal for the document had 114 paragraphs which were reduced to a skeleton of now 24 paragraphs only, with some basic considerations.

I.

After 40 years, *Inter Mirifica* appears in several ways different from those days.

Despite its history, the document now looks rather like the starting “shot” for more professional considerations. The Pastoral instruction, *Communio et Progressio*, is still considered the best document on church and social communication even beyond the Catholic Church. The bishops rightly felt that they were not fully competent for a professional document which later was confirmed by the short three-day council discussions (23-27 Nov 1962) on the text. Most Episcopal interventions of those days reflect a very rudimentary background on social communication, to say the least. *Communio et Progressio*, on the other hand, went through different stages of reconstruction and rewriting even in different languages in the course of seven years till it finally was published. Without the happenings around *Inter Mirifica* and a special mandate for the pastoral instruction (IM 23), *Communio et Progressio* would not exist.

Other developments documenting the permanent value of *Inter Mirifica* include the following:

1. For the first time in history, an **ecumenical council** tackles the field of social communications and issues a decree.
2. The adoption of the new expression **Social Communication** which was proposed by the preparatory commission of the document as more appropriate than terms like “mass media,” “audio visual means,” or “means of diffusion.” The new expression was accepted without further explanation and is used till today, even beyond the Church. Referring to *the communication of and in human society*, the term includes traditional communication means used by indigenous cultures as well as new developments like the Internet
3. With *Inter Mirifica*, the Council introduced **World Communication Day** which gives every year a special occasion to study and celebrate a communication-related theme thus, adding to a deeper understanding of social communication for and in the Church. The celebration increases awareness of both Catholics and Christians, and encourages them to support even financially all Christian communication efforts. Even though World Communication Day is not celebrated at the same time in every country and its possibilities have not yet been fully realized, it still is an important initiative. In some countries like Hong Kong, other Christian groups join the Catholic Church in the celebration.
4. The establishment of a **permanent office for social communication** in the Vatican, handling all matters related to the Church’s apostolate in communication is another development. This proposal was quickly acted upon by Pope Paul VI with “*In Fructibus Multis*” (2 April 1964) and has proven to be a focal point in the communication work of the Church worldwide. Some communication activities, however, remain still under the auspices of the Vatican Secretary of State like the Press Hall and Radio Vaticana.
5. The special emphasis on **training** for all members of the Church – clergy and laity, communicators and recipients – which is repeated many times later in other documents and exhortations still awaits full execution after 40 years. 40 years ago, it was said already that *they* (communicators and recipients) should be “trained at once” (IM 15), suggesting a strong sense of urgency.

6. *Inter Mirifica* confirms or rather “decides and ordains” the need for a **communication structure** within the Church under the direction of the Bishops (20), with national offices (21) to be under the direction of bishops’ conferences, and cooperation of these offices at international level (22). This has basically been fulfilled though the structures are not necessarily always very efficient and working as they should.

## II.

In the 40 years since *Inter Mirifica*, there are especially two developments or directions in social communication, which are of special importance:

1. The first is already reflected in *Communio et Progressio* (1971), where from the rights (IM 3) and moral obligations (4) of *Inter Mirifica*, the concerns of the Church shift to the role and importance of social communication for humankind (C&P, 17-100) and, only after such shift, to the contribution of Catholics to communication (101-180). This indicates a less dogmatic approach giving way to a more humble serving role of the Church in the field of communication.
2. The other important development beyond *Inter Mirifica* are the words of Pope John Paul II in his encyclical on Mission “*Redemptoris Missio*” on the emergence of a “new culture” through modern communication with “new ways of communicating, new languages, new techniques and new psychology” (RM 32c). This leads into the growing power and rapid development of media, especially the “new media.” We urgently need further study and action to effectively respond to this phenomenon.

The challenges of *Inter Mirifica* on the social communication of the Church have not diminished but are greater today. They call for more determination, investment and action on the basics of the council document. *Communio et Progressio*, *Aetatis Novae* and *Redemptoris Missio* give concrete guidelines, and recent developments urgently call for an appropriate Church response.

## III.

The development of social communication in human society in the last 40 years is reflected **for Asia** especially in two developments, the greater development of private and commercial media enterprises in India, for example, and the rapid development of new communication possibilities via satellite technology and the Internet. Countries like Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong and Japan are forerunners in modern communication technologies, but the “Digital Divide” within Asia is still not bridged.

Looking at the implementation of *Inter Mirifica* in Asia, the following points can be made:

1. The “**church’s birthright** to use and own these media” (IM, 3) can only be executed in a limited way in a non-Christian continent like Asia. Communist countries like China, Vietnam, North Korea or those under dictatorial regimes like Myanmar do not give a choice to the Church to fulfill this “birthright.” Some countries like Vietnam or Myanmar give a small chance for written material. For broadcasting, it is only the continental short-wave radio station **Radio Veritas Asia** which reaches those countries through airwaves.
2. As for **information** which is “useful and essential” (5), there are two Catholic news agencies in Asia, both initiated by professionals but not by official church bodies: UCANews based in Hong Kong and Bangkok covers in a professional way the whole continent and became over the years an indispensable instrument. SAR or South Asian Religious News based in Bangalore covers especially India and neighboring countries. It seems that none of the Asian bishops’ conferences has their own full time and regular information service.
3. The importance of **Public Opinion** (8) is becoming recognized in a growing way by Asian bishops’ conferences. Public Communication / Relations in countries where the Church is a small minority has become a special concern. This was also discussed in 1997 at the first “Bishops’ Institute for Social Communication” (BISCOM) of the Federation of Asian Bishops’ Conferences – Office of Social Communication.

4. The **formation of recipients** (9,10) especially of young people and their exposure to modern media is a permanent concern, which finds expression also in the demand for media education. But a systematic and deeper approach in this field is still to be developed. In the Philippines, there is the Philippine Association for Media Education (PAME) which is related to the National Office of Mass Media of the Filipino bishops' conference.
5. In a similar way, the awareness for a **systematic and regular support for professional communicators** (11) is still lacking and only done in individual cases.
6. "Pastors of souls" (13) are not yet sufficiently trained and prepared for the **communication formation** of the faithful and the development of pastoral communications. Social communication is still considered by many church superiors as a field for some specialists instead of being an essential dimension of *all* church apostolates.
7. The **training of priests, religious and laity** (15) to be done "at once" (1963!) is still sporadic in Asia, though it became more regular in demand and concrete trainings over the years. Catholic media organizations but also bishops' conferences in Asia have taken some initiatives but it is not yet a common concern. We still lack more systematic approaches, especially in our formation programs in seminaries and theological schools. The FABC-OSC organized a BISCOP on this, which developed guidelines documented in FABC-OSC Books vol. 2 "Social Communication Formation in Priestly Ministry" (Logos Publications, Manila).
8. The reminder of the council for the Catholics to have the **"obligation to sustain and assist"** Catholic communication projects (17) still has to be repeated and is not yet part of the general consciousness of laity and clergy including bishops. In many Asian countries, Catholics are very often part of the lower income group of the population. But there are also certain more developed countries where local support could be generated and possibly shared with others beyond their own boundaries. Here, the Asian support for RVA – the only continental Catholic radio station of the Church – is one example.
9. National or **bishops' conference offices for social communication** as demanded by Inter Mirifica (21) are in all Asian countries except one. All bishops and secretaries responsible for these offices meet yearly at the "FABC-OSC Bishops' Meets" since 1996. This meeting is organized by the FABC-Office of Social Communication, and the final statements of all annual meetings till 2001 are available in FABC-OSC Books vol. 1 "Church and Social Communication in Asia: Documents, Analysis, Experiences" (Logos Publications, Manila).