

Needs and Possibilities for Communication Education in Seminaries

Some considerations

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If the purpose of a seminary is to educate people for ministry one might first look into this purpose a little bit deeper. The word “educare” has as its roots the Latin word “ducere” which means “to lead”, to give direction. “E-ducare” might therefore be interpreted as to “lead out”, to give direction. It would mean to lead out of ignorance to knowledge and understanding. Education thus might be interpreted as to prepare people for life and to equip them with the knowledge and means necessary for life. It means for the Seminary to enable the students to know where to go and what to do in their future work as ministers to the Word of God. Education includes from elementary years reading and writing and other communication skills as essential for understanding and mastering life. When we talk about communication education in the Seminary and theological schools it is good to keep these basics in mind. Usually when we talk about “Communication Education” in the Seminary we think immediately of mass media or the modern means of communication which includes especially technical tools.

Most media courses or even those more general on communication aim at equipping the seminarian in the use and technique of the modern means of communication for his/her ministry. This, however, should not be the first purpose in the seminary. It should have been done already at the college level before entering the seminary for graduate studies. Today it should be part of any educational program to enable every student to critically judge and use the modern means of communication. This is part of the Communication/media education which *in turn* should be part of any school curriculum. It includes *having* a general knowledge about the ways and means modern media operate like e.g. the essential criteria to judge the quality of a news item, a TV program or a film. It is to enable people to become informed and responsible recipients. Communication Education in the seminary should be already on a more advanced level and should be able to build on the general media education in college and elementary. Programs in the seminary should slowly lead the seminarian to the proper and active use of communication for ministry because s/he is part and parcel of the modern communication world. This, however, includes not only modern means and technology. Proper communication preparation for ministry starts already long before and is based on the essentials of human communication.

Essential need for human communication

To communicate is essential to Christian ministry. If we look into the early Church as reflected in the *Acts of the Apostles* we find that at that early stage everybody was a communicator of her/his faith. “Those who had been scattered preached the word wherever they went” it says in Acts 8,4 referring to the persecution in Jerusalem (cf. also Acts 11,19-21!). Even when exiled, persecuted and driven away they communicated and shared their faith and conviction to people around them. In fact they saw it as a special calling and grace to become this way missionaries of the early faith community. It was the Holy Spirit who guided and ‘inspired’ them beyond any technical means. “Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip...” (8, 26); “Encouraged by the Holy Spirit” the church grew in Judea, Galilee and Samaria (9, 31); “While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said: Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul...” (13, 2) “Paul and his companions traveled throughout the region of Phrygia and Galatia, having been kept by the Holy Spirit from preaching the Word in the province of Asia...” (16, 6) This should not be different in the communication of the Church today! Therefore a proper communication education has to start on this personal and spiritual level. It has to start with the Holy Spirit!

Here we might also look in a special way into the ways and means of Jesus' communication. How did the master himself communicate? He is not the "perfect Communicator" because he was successful in the modern sense of the word. He did not convert the Pharisees and the scribes but he communicated the love and care of the Father and His Kingdom. He became the perfect communicator because he lived and practiced the basics of any human and Christian communication! He communicated in word and deed. The circumstances of his life, his birth in the manger, his death on the cross are a communication of God's love and his humility to become one of us. It is "giving of self in love" which is at the essence of Jesus' communication of any Christian communication as one of the church documents described it (*Communio et Progressio*, 1971, no. 11).

Jesus' healing and dealing with people reflects the basics of Christian communication. The healing of the mother in Law of Peter (Mk 1, 31) is just one example: He goes to her, holds her by the hand, and lifts her up i.e. heals her. These are the basics of any human and Christian communication which have to be developed already from the early stages in the seminary as an essential habit of a minister:

- Go to a person
- Place yourself into her/his situation ('shoes'), and
- Lift her/him up, help and heal in the power of God/Christ.

If all our ministries and even our own lives and dealings with each other would be based on these three steps our own communities and the world probably would be different!

This shows also that seminary education in communication is not first and foremost a technical task but rather a concern for a deep spirituality and faith.

It might be good at this stage also to remind ourselves that there is a great difference between training and formation which comes into play here. Training is concerned about skills whereas formation leads to an inner disposition. What we need first and foremost is a proper formation which is not only reflected in a curriculum but rather in the spiritual formation and the personal relationship and experience of the Lord. It really means to put on the body and soul of Christ in relating with others, in our own "giving of self in love" (C+P 11). It is not measured first and foremost in the 'Doing' but rather in the 'Being'.

Communication education in the seminary must start on the level of formation and develop from there. Placed into an overview one might see the different levels and concerns in the following way:

- Education > Knowledge
- Training > Skills: 'Doing'
- Formation > inner disposition: 'Being'

Proper communication education starts on the level of formation which is not only taught in words and prescriptions but on the level of deep spirituality and faith and example. This must also be considered as a special concern in Asia because our Asian cultures are based and have their essential identity from their spirituality.

Broader Approach to Communication

These basic considerations need still a further dimension to show that communication education is not only about Mass Media but needs a much broader approach which includes especially also the cultural dimension. The Second Vatican Council was the first Catholic Church assembly of that level which issued a document on “Social Communication,” *Inter Mirifica*.

The expression *Social Communication* was proposed by the preparatory commission for the document in saying that expressions like Mass Media, Media of Diffusion, Audio-visual means and similar would not be sufficient to express what the Church is concerned about. This proposal was accepted and became the standard expression in the Catholic Church but it was later adapted by secular communication institutions especially in Latin America.

Social Communication refers, beyond mass media, to all means and ways of communication in and of human society. It includes communication through traditional means like storytelling, dance, theater, music etc. as well as the modern means. It covers the whole range of human communication in society and thus creates a special challenge also for the communication education in seminaries.

Future Christian ministers must be open and possibly be trained in the proper application of communication means and methods which are part of our cultures. Many times, especially in rural areas, this communication is still more effective than modern technical means because it includes the direct personal involvement of the communicating parties. Such an awareness and support of traditional communication can also help to mitigate or even integrate possible negative effects of globalization especially on young people.

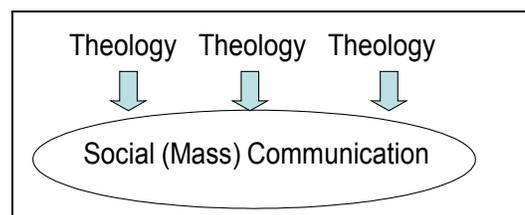
Christian faith has to be contextualized and inculturated which is not done necessarily with the modern means. This broader approach to communication, however, which gives equal ‘right’ to the basics of human communication and the traditional means of communication leads towards that.

Based on Communication Theology

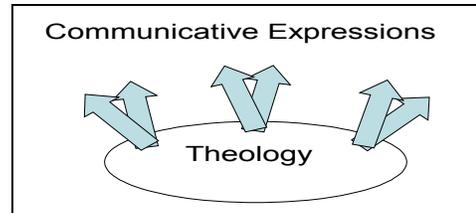
Communication education in the seminary should further not only be considered as *one* of the many subjects taught in a theological school. There is a deeper theological reason, why the communication dimension should be at the center of all teaching in Theology.

This is the concern of the emerging field of *Communication Theology* which should be underlying any communication education in the seminary.

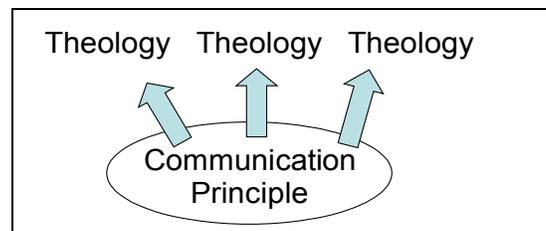
In the past we have very often tried to develop a “Theology of Communication” which somehow attempted to “baptize” communication, especially the mass media and bring them into the Church’s fold. It can be expressed in the following graphic:



There is also another perspective and consideration aiming for a “Communicative Theology”. It is concerned about the ‘communicative expressions’ of Theology. How can Theology express itself in such a way that it can be more easily understood by simple people and non-theologians?

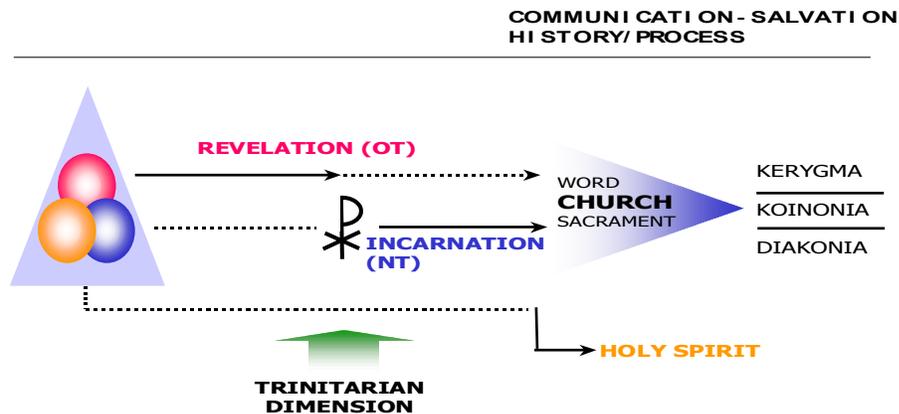


“Communication Theology”, however, takes Communication as a theological principle. The whole of Theology is considered and studied under the perspective of communication. Beginning with the Trinitarian God as communication between Father, Son and Holy Spirit it goes through Revelation to Incarnation as God’s way of communicating and from there to the communication of the Church as the continuation of this communication into every time and place. The basic approach can be shown in the following way:



- a. The Trinitarian God communicates in Himself i.e. there is an ongoing communication at the Center of the Holy Trinity. Father, Son and Holy Spirit communicate with each other and we as human beings are able to communicate because we are created in “His image and likeness”. Here is the theological reason for our own communication ability.
- b. This Trinitarian communicating God, however, also reveals himself in communicating with his creatures. He uses all ways and means of human communication; he communicates verbally and non-verbally, he communicates with signs and actions. On almost every page, the Old (First) Testament documents God’s non-verbal and verbal communication with his people.
- c. The high point of this revelation, however, is the Incarnation of Jesus Christ. God the Father communicates with his creatures through his son, Jesus Christ. As the letter to the Hebrews affirms: “In the past God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets at many times and in various ways. But in these last days he has spoken to us by his son, whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom he made the universe. The son is the radiance of God’s glory and the exact representation of his being...” (1, 1-3). Jesus Christ again communicates in words and deeds, he uses signs and symbols which go beyond or support his words. He communicates through the whole way of his life. (cf. *Communio et Progressio II*).

- d. The Church receives from all this her sending (mandate) to communicate. She is to continue God's communication in Revelation and Incarnation into the here and now of every time and place. Thus, the Church is the presence of the communicating God between peoples; she *is*, as Avery Dulles wrote in a famous paper for the American Bishops in 1971, *Communication*. Social communication is not just a job for specialists, even Church-specialists, but a dimension for every Christian as member of the Church and to be reflected in daily life. In the same way like in the *Acts of the Apostles* also today every Christian is and must be a communicator in the full sense thus reflecting the Church.



As a consequence out of all these considerations it is clear that the need for Communication Education in the Seminary is not just served with *one* additional course on media or something like this in the already overcrowded curriculum.

In the spirit of Communication Theology *all* theological disciplines should be aware and include the communication dimension in their teaching and research. All are related to God's communication as Avery Dulles points out that "theology is at every point concerned with the realities of communication" ("The Craft of Theology: From Symbol to System," 1992, 22. cf. Eilers 2002, 43).

If the Church is to continue God's communication from Trinity to Revelation and Incarnation into the 'here and now' of people of every time and place it must be reflected in all of theology and all of her pastoral ministries. This, however, is not only a question of knowledge and transmission of knowledge but once again rather a disposition and inner dimension of every theology professor. At the same time is a unifying element for the whole of theology. The Jesuits pointed in this direction with a document on social communication in their General Congregation 1995 when they wrote:

"Communication in the society has usually been considered as a sector of apostolic activity, a field for some specialists who have 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. Clearly not all Jesuits should engage in media. Nevertheless, every Jesuit, in order to be effective, must be aware of and well versed in the language, symbols, and strengths and weaknesses of the modern communication

culture. This is to make the shift, to realize that this communication environment is a milieu in which large numbers of people can be reached and enriched, where literacy, knowledge and solidarity can be fostered.”

Indeed communication is an integral dimension of all apostolates and this must be reflected also in any communication education in the seminary.

Curriculum for social communication

How could a *Curriculum for Communication* in seminary education look like?

1. It first has to be stated again, that there is the basic need for communication *formation* on the human and spiritual level. This is not done with a course alone but through the whole formation program and an open communicative atmosphere in a seminary. The three basic steps of human and Christian communication, to go, to embrace and immerse and to lift up (cf. Mk 1,31) are not only taught but practiced in daily life. If especially at the beginning of theological studies an introductory course could be given to make the students more aware of the basics of this human/Christian communication it would set the tone for all the following studies and activities in theology. In fact, I am teaching such a course since almost 20 years at the Divine Word School of Theology in Tagaytay, Philippines. Every school year the students of the first year of theology have in the first semester an obligatory course “*Introduction to Social Communication*” where we talk mainly about human communication, the theological dimension of communication and only in passing about the basics of media and group communication. (This is reflected in the textbook we use: “*Communicating in Community*,” where the first two chapters are more extensively covered, whereas the others are given only in the basics as far as time allows.)
2. We can not escape the fact, that the modern world is a world of communications. Pope John Paul II calls the world of communication “the *first* ‘areopagus’ of the modern age which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village’. The means of social communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large. In particular the younger generation is growing up in a world conditioned by the mass media.” (Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* 1990, 37c) This requires from every theology student more than from others the ability of critically seeing and using the means of communication in daily life. It is the purpose of *Media or Communication Education* to bring this basic knowledge and develop a critical mind especially in young people. It actually should be an obligatory course and training already on the high school and college level. Such education introduces into the workings of modern media, their structures, means and methods. It shows e.g. the basic elements of a news item, how the different radio and TV programs are produced but also how communication companies are structured and try to exercise power in conquering the mind and taste of people for their purposes...
3. After this basic training there is a need for a special course on *pastoral communication* especially in the later development of theological studies: how to communicate in Ministry and Mission. How do the modern means of communication influence and determine those people we live with and we are to care for? How can we make good use of these means in our ministry to serve the needs of people better and bring them nearer to the Lord? The people we work with are living in a world determined by the media and even we are consciously or unconsciously part of it ourselves. How can we let the Holy Spirit come into such a situation? The same holds also for those ministries, who serve people from or in other

cultures. Our communication has to adjust and be determined by these cultures because it is always the recipient who is the ‘basis’ for our decision making and our communication approach. Jesus starts with the life and concerns of the people. We have to do the same in our time!

4. In addition to these basic courses and approaches for every seminarian there should be also some offers for more *specialized courses*, especially for students with greater interest and some communication capabilities of their own. Thus there could be a film-club as a regular activity where seminarians once or twice a month watch a movie, discuss the content, methods in presenting the story and a critical evaluation. Cardinal Roger M. Mahony from Los Angeles has written 1992 a “Pastoral letter for Film Makers, Film Viewers: their challenges and opportunities” (cf. Eilers: Church and Social Communication. Basic Documents. Manila 1997) which could be very helpful for such an activity. Talented seminarians could also themselves practice radio and television productions or become part of such either on their own or in existing companies. Journalistic practices can be developed and taught. When I was a seminarian we had a “Press-group” where we wrote news items and articles for existing newspapers and periodicals; they were printed and published and we were very proud of it. Many of us saw our names printed for the first time...

Today we have new communication and information technologies. How are we going to ‘use’ them in our ministry and how can they help? What’s about E-vangelism, cyber-missionaries or similar activities and possibilities?

Other fields like Media or Communication Ethics should also not be overlooked. They can be part of Moral Theology but really would need a broader study in our times.

5. The need for serious *research in the field of social communication* and theology has also to be mentioned here. When Pope John Paul II talks about the “new areopagus” he also mentions that there is now a “new culture”. This 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.” Such a situation calls for deeper research and study which is very often missing in our Christian communication activities. We very often live and work more according to trial and error than based on serious study and research. This is not only a call on theological faculties or other specialized bodies. Also seminary students should be involved in research and looking deeper into issues. They can be encouraged to write respective papers or even do their thesis on a communication related subject. They can be involved in surveys to discover a certain communication situation. Thus I did two years ago with my students a study on how young people in the areas around the theological school and in some parts of Manila use and see modern media in their lives. Unfortunately we have only very few scientific publications specializing in this field. It is high time that we go deeper to explore the ‘market’ but also to see better the different possibilities for God’s Word in our time.

Following an initiative from our FABC Office of Social Communication where we – also with the help of WACC! – called a group academicians from different Asian countries in 1999 to start at St. John’s University in Bangkok an “Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication” (ARC). It is supposed to be a clearing house, to collect and disseminate relevant information, and animate people to explore the relationship between Social Communication and Religion. And this is not for Christianity only but for all religions. It is not only Christianity which lives in a new modern communication society. Also other religions are in many ways

affected by modern developments in communication! ARC recently started a scientific journal, which should contribute to the concern.

What are we to do?

There is a certain sequence already in the programs proposed. But this is not done just with adding new courses. More important is to change our own and other peoples mind-set. In the spirit of the Jesuit considerations mentioned above we must see that social communication is not only a specialized field but rather the “air we breathe” and the “water we swim in.” Right from our upbringing we are influenced and to quite an extent determined by the ways and means of communicating in our own cultures but also by the modern means of communication, which today even go beyond the mass media. We can not live without Internet any more. What are the pastoral and theological consequences of this fact? This question has to be answered first and foremost by seminary professors but also by every seminarian.

The task before us is great but urgent. There is no time any more to be lost and we should begin here and now to change and slowly adjust our mind-set to the realities of this ‘new culture’ with “new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.” (John Paul II)

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