

## **Pastoral Communication: From Hierarchy to Network**

***By Franz-Josef Eilers,svd***

Since the beginning of the 1980s was teaching for some years a course on Development and Communication at the Pontifical Gregorian University in Rome. We started with an overview about the early literature and teaching in the field and began with *Daniel Lerner's* "The passing of Traditional Society" (1958) where he develops his modernization theory basically with the understanding that western communication concepts and experiences are to be applied also to other – so called underdeveloped – countries referring especially to some Middle East countries. A few years later *Wilbur Schramm* – considered as one of the fathers of modern communication studies – followed similar lines with his "Mass Media and National Development" which had been commissioned to him by UNESCO. It was published 1964 and was for many years considered as a kind of 'bible' for Communication and Development. Here the 'western model' of mass media – as already indicated in the title – played an important role. This somehow 'consolidated' the top-down approach in introducing communication for development: the so called 'developing countries' had to be taught how to develop through and with the powerful media...

*Everett Rogers* followed with his studies on *Diffusion of Innovations* another approach which began 1962 and was further developed and updated over the years to follow till 2003 in five revised editions with studies and proposals how to communicate and introduce "Innovations" into and within social systems. It was somehow an attempt to break with the (Mass) Media dominance into a more participatory approach. With the "*Convergence model of communication*" (1975) which he developed with Lawrence Kincaid – inspired by studies in Korea – their publication of *Communication Networks: towards a new paradigm for Research* became the basis for a broader participatory approach to communication in later studies and programs.

This was also taken up by some Latin American authors. They were inspired by a similar attempt for education by Brazilian *Paolo Freire* who laid the ground with his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* where he developed his concept of *Conscientization*: to make people aware of their own personal creative abilities instead of being 'dictated' or determined by outside 'forces' like the traditional

teacher who actually should become a 'companion' instead of following the old "banking system" where the teacher 'deposits' his knowledge into the head of the student to be 'retrieved' at Examination time! People must become aware of their own inner creative abilities and talents instead of being 'dictated' and determined only from 'outside' which means: moving away from the 'banking system' to stimulating creativity. Freire was thus moving from the traditional '*hierarchical*' way of teaching to a participatory approach by fully realizing the creative potentials of the participants. This is today also supported by technical developments in Communication: we are not any more 'analogue' with one following the other but 'digital' which means we are immediately present in a situation without boarder and limits. In the old Sender-Message-Receiver (S-M-R) communication models it was the "Sender' who called the shots, to 'convert', inform or convince the Recipient. Modern communication is *participatory* and not any more top-down and the Church cannot escape from this. This means also in pastoral reality that it is not any more the Parish Priest who is at the center of a 'parish' but rather – hopefully – the living community which responds to and also '*enacts*' a participatory communication. This approach was already the 'common ground' of Rogers/Kincaid when in 1981 also talked about a 'new paradigm for Research'.

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The American theologian *Avery Dulles sj*, author of the "Models of the Church" studied all Vatican II documents under the perspective of communication. From there he came up with five different '*models of the communicating Church*'. Here only the very first model is '*hierarchical*' which is reflected in directives like documents and 'pastoral' letters. All other 'models' are community or *Network* oriented ways of communicating: the "*Herald or Kerygmatic*" model as well as the '*Sacramental*' and "*Communion*" but especially also the "*Secular-dialogic*" model which is based on the final Vatican II document *Gaudium et Spes* which underlines the need for dialogue and also proper understanding of Culture in the life and ministry of the Church.

Such an approach was strongly developed by the Church in Latin America from where also the ministry of Pope Francis is nourished. It is reflected in its concept and practice of *Basic Christian Communities* but also reflected when the final

document of the 5<sup>th</sup> CELAM General Assembly in Aparecida (2007) talks about “new languages” and calls for “the creation of *network* points and digital rooms” for Church bodies. This also indicates the urgent need for any member but especially any leader of the Church today to be aware that the Church as a *living community* and not simply a ‘structure’ with respective offices.

All this has to be seen also in relation to digital communication developments! They are a special challenge for proper pastoral communication dispositions of Church related persons as well as institutions. Two recent “World Communication Day Messages” of Pope emeritus Benedict XVI are testimonies for this. The first one of 2006 has the title “The Media: A *Network* for Communications” which still deals with networking of the *Media*. The last of his messages (2013), however, is concerned about “*Social Networks: Portals of Truth and Faith, new spaces for Evangelization*”. Here the Pope sees “Social Networks” as spaces where dialogue and debate takes place which this way re-inforce the ‘bonds of unity’. “Social networks’, he says, “are the result of human interaction, but for their part they also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships: a considered understanding of this environment is therefore the prerequisite for a significant presence there.” “The ability to employ the new languages is required, not just to keep up with the times, but precisely in order to enable the infinite richness of the Gospel to find forms of expression capable of reaching the minds and hearts of all.” (5,6)

In view of ministry the Pope sees in Social networks three elements which also affect our ministry and the way we communicate: 1. *Information*, which leads to true communication, 2. *Links* which lead to real Friendships and 3. *Connections* which facilitate communion because *real communication means sharing ourselves-* or as *Communio et Progressio* (the pastoral Instruction demanded by Vatican II) defines: “*sharing of Self in Love.*” (1)

Pope Francis confirms in *Evangelii Gaudium* (87) such an approach when he states that we sense in “networks and means of human communication” “the challenge of finding and sharing a ‘mystique’ of living together, of mingling and encounter, of embracing and supporting one another” which can become “ a genuine experience of fraternity, a caravan of solidarity, a sacred pilgrimage.”

In some European countries the Church is restructuring their parishes because of lack of priests and diminishing numbers of followers. Thus the prediction is that traditional parish systems cannot exist anymore the way it used to be. In many places former parishes are subsumed into a broader units which somehow seems to continue former structures but in reality they often are not anymore serving real communication with everybody. In order to 'save' hierarchical structures the need of "living communities" seems to be sacrificed at a time where especially such 'living faith communities' are supposed to grow as homes and determine the life of people... Already the early Church of the "Acts of the Apostles" documents such communities (e.g. Antioch) and St. Paul's writings are not addressed to bishops and priests (Hierarchy!) but to the living networks of communities and his followers which is partly reflected also in the long lists for greetings towards the end of his letters.

Today we seem to need a kind of radical shift from a "Hierarchical" approach to "Networks", which is strongly supported by the means and possibilities of digital communication. This shift can be seen in *communicative persons* – including Bishops and Priests – but especially in groups of living and committed people who are this way part of a supportive network of renewed and living Christian Communities!

This is especially reflected in proper **Network dispositions** which we need to develop and maintain:

### **Hierarchy**

*'Proclaim'*

*Demand-Command*

*Prescription*

*"Boss"*

*Know everything*

*Structure*

*Obligations*

### **Networks**

*Share*

*Ask*

*Proposal*

*Servant/Companion*

*Searching*

*'Grouping'*

*Creative Action*

*Fixed opinion*

*Open Mind*

Actually already the Apostle Paul in his letter to Philemon uses the “Network” approach when he says that he could *demand* from him but instead is *asking* for Onesimus his former slave.

To conclude with another example: some critics have called the Catholic Church in Germany a “*Statement Church*” because it seems to be the (almost) only thing which outside people perceive and hear... In a similar way a 30 year old former Seminarian and now Public Relations Officer recently published a critical book on our preaching ( *Erik Fluegge: Der Jargon de Betroffenheit: Wie die Kirche an ihrer Sprache verreckt*”) which indicates in the subtitle his conviction that the Church will “perish because of *her language*”. This might be applied not only for preaching but also to the way we communicate in our ‘ministry’ especially in some parishes: Which language do we use..? How are we related to each other? If our communication does not follow a ‘proper’ *network style* which is promoted and developed by the social media we cannot reach people anymore!