

# Social Communication and the Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church

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The "Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church" refers to media in several sections. The first refers to "Octogesima Adverniens" where the "influence of the means of social communications" are listed under "Challenges" to be responded to together with issues like urbanization, unemployment, discrimination, immigration, population, growth and ecology. Beyond this listing, there is however, no further consideration on social communication as such. (no. 100)

## ➤ New technologies for solidarity

Under the "Principle of Solidarity" (Part One, chapter 4 on "Principles of the Church's Social Doctrine") there is a more extensive description of the role and rapid expansion of these media "in real time such as those offered by information technology, the extraordinary advances in computer technology, the increased volume of commerce and information exchange all bear witness to the fact that, for the first time since the beginning of human history, it is now possible at least technically to establish relationships between people who are separated by great distances and are unknown to each other." Here, there is also a hint towards the so-called "digital divide" when the Compendium speaks of "inequalities between developed and developing countries." This challenge is further described in the following way: "The acceleration of inter-dependence between persons and peoples needs to be accompanied by equally intense efforts on the ethical, social plane in order to avoid the dangerous consequences of perpetrating injustice on a global scale." (no. 192) These considerations are based on John Paul II's Encyclical "Sollicitudo Rei Socialis" (nos. 11-22), but they really do not spell out in any way the more concrete consequences for the Church how to handle and remedy such a situation from the communications point of view. Only the situation is described without any further communication consequences.

## ➤ Democratic Participation

In Part Two, section IV of chapter 8 of the "Compendium" on the "Democratic System" of "The Political Community," there is a whole section with three paragraphs (nos. 414-416) about information and democracy. Here, information is presented as "among the principal instruments of democratic participation." It is expected that the "many forms and instruments of information and communications" are guaranteed for a "real pluralism in this delicate area of social life." "Conditions of equality" are to be secured and nothing should hinder the "full exercise of the right to objectivity in information." The news media should not be controlled "by just a few people or groups" especially not if they reflect "ever closer ties between government activity and the financial and information establishments." (no. 414) In fact, the media should be "used to build up and sustain the human community in its different sectors: economic, political, cultural, educational and religious."

Communication must be "in the service of the common good" as the Catechism of the Catholic Church (2494) and the Vatican II Decree on Social Communication "Inter Mirifica" (no. 3) demand. The Compendium stipulates that any responsible information and media system must contribute "to the betterment of the human person," to make people "more spiritually mature, more aware of the dignity of their humanity, more responsible, or more open to others in particular to the neediest and weakest." Especially new technologies must "respect legitimate cultural differences." (no. 415)

## ➤ Ethics of Communication

The ethics of communication are at the center of the following and last paragraph of this section of the

Compendium. The intrinsic difficulties of the media world, it says, "are often exacerbated by ideology, the desire for profit, and political control, rivalry and conflicts between groups and other social evils." Here, the Compendium says, "moral values and principles apply also to the media." These have to be applied, as the "Ethics in Communication" of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications (2000) says, to the content of the message as well as to the communication process itself and structural issues. For a responsible communication ethics, the "one fundamental moral principle always applies: the human person and the human community" which are "again the end and measure of the use of the media." In fact, human beings cannot attain the good without "the common good of the community to which they belong." ("Ethics in Communication" no. 22). The citizens must be involved in the decision making in media policies, in a "genuinely representative way" which should not be "skewed in favor of special interest groups when the media are a money-making venture." (no. 416)

### ➤ **Service in Culture and Community**

The mass media are again mentioned in chapter 12 in the third part of the Compendium on "Social Doctrine and Ecclesial Action" under the section "Service in Various Sectors of Social Life" and here, under the heading of "Service in Culture" (no. 560), the role of the laity in promoting an authentic culture in view of the mass media is underlined. The choices made "have a moral weight and should be evaluated in this light. In order to choose correctly, one must know the norms of the moral order and apply them faithfully," the text says in reference to the Vatican II Decree "Inter Mirifica" (no. 4) which can be connected again to the earlier considerations of the Compendium on communication ethics. (cf. 416)

In a more positive approach, the Compendium invites (no. 561) to "look upon the media as possible and powerful instruments of solidarity." This is not the case when they are supporting "economic systems that serve greed and covetousness." Here, the existing gap between the "information rich" and "information poor" is mentioned again as earlier in no. 416. Modern communication media should help to bridge this gap also in giving proper "training in its use" which would refer to the whole field of media (communication) education.

The next section (no. 562) dwells on the media users who have their own special obligations. These are listed as being discerning and selective in media use in such a way that the ethics in the media are applied to the "building up of the human community" on the basis of solidarity, justice and love. In the light of faith, this text concludes that "human communication can be seen as a journey from Babel to Pentecost, or rather as the personal and social commitment to overcome the collapse of communication (cf. Gen. 11:4-8), opening people to the gift of tongues (cf. Acts 2:5-11) to communication as restored by the power of the Spirit sent by the Son." (no. 562)

### ➤ **Evaluation**

The Compendium sees clearly the means of communication as essential to human society and also the Church's responsibilities in supporting and developing these means. The document, however, does not go beyond general demands and repeating especially what the Ethics documents of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication have already spelled out in more detail. [See *Ethics in Advertising (1997)*, *Communication (2000)*, *Internet (2001)*.] The considerations seem to be mainly referring to the mass media without a broader concept of communication as proposed by Vatican II in the Decree "Inter Mirifica."

In fact, if one considers the whole Compendium as a summary of the teachings on the Social Doctrine of the Church, the communication dimension in many of these doctrines is really not spelled out. The four times where communication is referred to reflect some essential areas like the importance of Ethics in Media Use and also the new technologies as potentially promoting greater solidarity with more easy ways for communicating, or the power structure of media enterprises. But communication theology or even the broader concept of "social" communication as promoted by Vatican II's "Inter Mirifica" seems not to come into play.

“God’s plan of love for humanity” (Part 1, chapter 1) is a communication of a loving Father, which is fulfilled in Christ in the Holy Spirit. The “social doctrine” of the Church, in fact, is a continuation of God’s communication into the here and now of human society. The human person is a communicating person (cf. I, 3) because the Trinitarian God is a Communicating God in Himself as well as in relation to His creatures who are created in His Image and Likeness.

Also for the family, human work and society on the economic, political, and international field, the communication dimension is essential as it is also in safeguarding the environment and in the promotion of peace. But this dimension was reflected in a very sporadic way and would need a much deeper and broader assessment. The same is also true for Part III on the “Social Doctrine and Ecclesiastical Action.”

#### ➤ **Four Perspectives**

Here are only four perspectives which might help towards a broader understanding and application of social communication to the basics of the Compendium:

#### **Social Communication**

1. Good governance is called the “key” to *social evangelization*. Social evangelization can also be referred as *social communication* because there can be no evangelization without social communication.

*Social communication* is the communication *of* and *in* human society. It does not only include mass media or even media; rather, it includes *all* ways and means of human communication from interpersonal communication, traditional ways of communicating up to modern technical communications, like the Internet. The functioning of the family as the vital cell of society (Part II, Compendium) depends on the proper functioning of this social communication.

2. "Mass" out, "Media" in

In modern technical developments, we don't talk anymore that much about *mass* media since most of the television and radio programs are available for a group of people and used by them, but not for the masses as such (“niche programs”). They are “niche” programs intended for a limited number of people but not for the masses anymore. Only on special occasions, there are still masses involved in a particular program e.g. the Olympic games.

But before talking about technical means, it is important to look in a more general way at the role of communication in culture and society - from interpersonal to group communication, from non-verbal to verbal communication.

Any culture is formed by communication and lives with communication. “Governance” is to quite an extent “communication”: how to communicate, what to communicate, to whom and in what way? Because of this, social communication which is an expression proposed by Vatican II (“*Inter Mirifica*”), should be a much more essential part of the “Social Doctrine of the Church.”

#### **Communication and Culture**

3. "Authentic culture" is not only determined by mass media (as seems to be assumed in no. 560 of the Compendium) but by any and the many ways of human communicating.

Pope John Paul II refers to this in his Encyclical “*Redemptoris Missio*” (1990):

“37(c) *Cultural sectors: the modern equivalents of the Areopagus.* After preaching in a number of places, Saint Paul arrived in Athens, where he went to the Areopagus and proclaimed the Gospel in language appropriate to and understandable in those surroundings. At that time the Areopagus represented the cultural centre of the learned people of Athens, and today it can be taken as a symbol of the new sectors in which the Gospel must be proclaimed.

The first Areopagus of the modern age is the *world of communications*, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village’ ...”

#### 4. Beyond Norms

4.1 To know the “norms of the moral order and apply them faithfully” is not enough in view of the media. One must also know the ways media operate from their administrative structure to production and presentation techniques as well as placement (“contacts,” society, audiences, recipients). The development of content and message needs to be known; these are subjects not only of media education and communication formation but also, of professional studies on social communication.

4.2 This concern includes also the fields of communication theology and spirituality.

- a. The Christian God is a communicating God and all theology really is grounded in the study of His communication. In concrete: How, for example, did Jesus communicate? How would He handle social evangelization (communication)?
- b. The spiritual dimension is reflected also in John Paul II's World Communication Day message (1999) which is only partly quoted in the Compendium. In reality, the Pope does not only give one but three criteria for this:
  - First, the Church lives and represents the culture of *remembrance* whereas modern communications has transitory “news”
  - *Wisdom* stands versus information as *meaningless accumulation of facts*.
  - Culture of *joy* versus *entertainment* becoming soul-less flight from truth and responsibility.

“We find ourselves in a time of threat and promise” in this field, the Pope says at this occasion.

#### 4.3 Media as Possible Instruments of Solidarity

The considerations on the information rich and information poor or the so-called “digital divide,” also have to be broadened:

Do the *media* really contribute to the injustices and imbalances that give rise to the very suffering that they report? Media are handled by people and it is the mind of these people which has to be changed into responsible people. Media are only *instruments*: Don't blame the instruments but rather the ones who use them!

Here is, therefore, an urgent need for proper *communication formation*, including spirituality, for all – communicators and recipients. The field of *communication ethics* comes in as expressed in the sections nos. 416-561 of the Compendium. Communication Ethics is related to Moral Theology. But unfortunately, the Church is not at all in the forefront of this field...

Once again: Do we know how the means of communication, including the media, operate or how to properly use them, or develop proper disposition in the recipients using them (formation of conscience but also “professional knowledge on the workings of the media)?

Invest into *responsible people*! Professionals and Recipients!

The duty of recipients is first, to discern; and second, to select. But how can the recipients discern and select without proper knowledge and education in the professional field?

4.4 “Communication as a Journey from Babel to Pentecost.” (no. 562) This paragraph of the Compendium re-echoes Carlo Martini's considerations on the Biblical dimension of communication but does not propose any further concrete steps and proposals for communication, nor education, nor ethics.

Social communication gives us plenty of possibilities but how to see and use them in a proper and responsible way is really not yet spelled out in the Compendium.

The moral fiber of society as such is decisive for communication because communication operates in the context of society. We should not just complain or cry but *do* something positive. This means also to put *all* considerations of the Compendium into the proper **communication perspective** and dimension, far beyond the few paragraphs mentioned in this overview and in the Appendix of the document.

Social communication is not just media and technology but people. Their way of communicating interpersonally and in society makes all the difference and this is the decisive point. It means that we really have to educate and create an atmosphere for all people – communicators and recipients – to grow with a sense of responsibility and commitment in a modern world which seems to be totally influenced and in many ways determined by the different means of communication.

(1) cf. Carlo Martini: “Ephatha, Be Opened” no. 1; 19 ff.; 28 f. In “Communicating Christ to the World.” Milan (Centro Ambrosiano) 1994; Manila (Claretian) 1996.

(2) This paper was presented at the “Colloquium on Laity in Public Life: Nurturing the Inner Being for a New Social Evangelization” organized by the FABC-Office of Human Development (Gabrielite Center, Bangkok, Thailand 15-19 Sept 2008).

Social Communication and the Compendium  
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