

# GLOBAL COMMUNICATION CULTURE

## *A Challenge to Spirituality of the Heart*

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In the early months of 2005, Pope John Paul II—confronted by the limitations of his debilitating illness—used the modern means of communication to maintain his pastoral presence. In the year of his death he released two important statements on the evangelical potential of the modern communication culture.

In the most recent statement—the *Apostolic Letter on the 'Rapid Development of Technology'*—he makes this perceptive observation:

The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial, and social behavior. We are dealing with a complex problem, because the culture itself, prescinding from its content, arises from the very existence of new ways to communicate with hitherto unknown techniques and vocabulary. (3)

### *Communication and mission*

In our contemporary world, the technology of communication has expanded exponentially. Ours is truly as never before a 'communication society'. But, have we—missionaries of the Gospel—kept up with these extraordinary developments that are, in effect, redefining the human condition and the meaning of human society, even in the more remote parts of the planet? The wonders of modern communication have made universal communion and communication realistically achievable for the first time in history, although it cannot be said that this has already happened! Rather than

talking from 'on high', from a position of absolute and unengaged authority, the Church today wants to enter into a dialogue with its surroundings. Paul VI wrote in his first encyclical: 'The Church should enter into dialogue with the world in which it exists and labours. The Church has something to say; the Church has a message to deliver; the Church has a communication to offer' (*Ecclesiam suam* 65). The pope's words still challenge us to re-think the fundamentals of our mission in the light of modern technology.

The world today is a world not only of mass communication technology but also of profound cultural and social change, a change effected by the globalization and diversification of the means of communication. This calls for a 'radical change of mentality and attitude' if we are to effectively 'apply evangelical commitment to the concrete and often disturbing problems of human promotion' today (Introduction, *Religious and Human Promotion*, 1978).

Pope John Paul II has referred to the 'new' world of media and mass communication as 'a new and emerging cultural world and as a series of means serving communication'; 'like any culture, the mass media needs to be evangelized' (*Ecclesia in Africa* 71). Modern communication is shaping and creating quite a radically different world culture. The first messengers of the Gospel used the communication technology of their day to best advantage: the Roman communication system, Greek language and ideas, letter writing *etc.* The Protestant reformers were greatly advantaged in the spreading of their 'new' faith by the in-

vention of mass printing. The best examples of evangelization have always been culturally sensitive and conditioned to the means of communication, making use of the strengths and techniques of different cultures and civilizations as the medium for the message.

Today in fact the mass media constitute not only a world but a culture and a civilization. And it is also to this world that the Church is sent to bring the Good News of salvation. The heralds of the Gospel *must therefore enter this world* in order to allow themselves to be permeated by this new civilization and culture for the purpose of learning how to make good use of them. (John Paul II, *ibid*, emphasis mine)

### ***Communication and the ‘way of the heart’***

We like to quote that passage from the First Letter of John about the experience at the heart of the message we want to communicate: ‘we have come to know and believe in the love God has for us’ (1 John 4, 16). But, how do we communicate this experience today, in creative and relevant dialogue with the modern world? For communication, I suggest, is central to the missionary vocation, its spirit and charisma.

Paul VI’s insight remains valid: the way of communication is the way of *dialogue*. This is not a top-down process but a ‘you-me’ (us) process. ‘The world cannot be saved from the outside. As the word of God became a human person, so must human persons to a certain degree *identify themselves* with the forms of life of those to whom they wish to bring the message of Christ’ (EN 87). This is the ‘way of the heart’. The pope continues: ‘before speaking it is necessary to *listen*, not only to the person’s voice, but to their *heart*.... The spirit of dialogue is friendship and, even more, is service. All this we must remember and strive to put into practice according to the example and commandment that Christ left us’.

In his encyclical, *Redemptoris missio* (37), John Paul II recalls the story of St Paul’s missionary adaptation of the ‘good news’ to the



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social and cultural milieu of the philosophers of Athens (Acts 17, 16 – 31). He says that the primary *areopagus* of the modern world is ‘the world of communication that is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a *global village*’. The world of communication is profoundly altering the behaviour of people. Then he goes on to ask whether, in fact, the challenges and possibilities of the modern *areopagus* of communication have been too much *neglected* by the missionaries of today, suggesting that we have not effectively undertaken the task of evangelizing modern culture.

Involvement in the mass media, however, is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communication. This is a complex issue, since the ‘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. Paul VI said that ‘the split between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly the tragedy of our times’ and the field of communication fully confirms this judgment.

The pope’s observations are both profoundly challenging and deeply disturbing. He reminds us that culture is always the focus and the environment of the work of evangelization.

Are we neglecting to address the most powerful culture of our age—the one being shaped by mass communication?

### *The Trinity, contemplation and communication*

The divine way of being and acting—communion/communication—in the mystery of the Trinity, is at the very heart of the life and activity of the Church. And as the passage from 1 John 4 makes clear: the foundation of the activities of communication and dialogue always has to be the attitude called *contemplation*, ‘we have come to know’. Without an authentically contemplative attitude there can be no true listening or openness to the other: to God, to other human persons, to the world.

In his Message for World Communications Day 2012, ‘Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization’, Pope Benedict stressed the importance of silence in communication: ‘It concerns the relationship between silence and the word: two aspects of communication which need to be kept in balance, to integrate and to be integrated with one another if authentic dialogue and deep closeness between people are to be achieved. When word and silence become mutually exclusive, communication breaks down, either because it gives rise to confusion or because, on the contrary, it creates an atmosphere of coldness; when they complement one another, however, communication acquires value and meaning’. One of the dangers in the modern world of instant communication is that there is no time to pause and reflect. Silence, I would suggest, is integral to a spirituality of the heart; the transparent and open heart is one that listens and is vulnerable. It has been said that information is the work of the intellect, but communication is the work of the heart (contemplative).

The process of communication nowadays is largely fuelled by questions in search of answers. Search engines and social networks have become the starting point of communication for many people who are seeking advice, ideas, information and answers. In our time the

internet is becoming more a forum for questions and answers—indeed, people today are frequently bombarded with answers to questions they have never asked and to needs of which they are unaware. (Benedict XVI, *ibid*)

In his message for 2013, ‘Social Networks: portals of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization’, Pope Benedict returned to the theme of dialogue, observing that ‘social networks are becoming part of the very fabric of human society’... ‘nourished by aspirations rooted in the human heart’. Media can help ‘foster forms of dialogue and debate’ and so ‘reinforce the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family. The exchange of information can become true communication, links ripen into friendships, and connections facilitate communion’. Surely this is one of the aspirations of an authentic spirituality of the heart. ‘For those who have accepted the gift of faith with an open heart, the most radical response to mankind’s questions about love, truth and the meaning of life—questions certainly not absent from social networks—are found in the person of Jesus Christ’.

A contemplative attitude gives us the critical *distance* we need to judge and evaluate the information we experience. Rowan Williams writes, in an essay on the integrity of theological language:

Contemplation is a deeper appropriation of the vulnerability of the self in the midst of the language and transactions of the world; it identifies the real damaging pathologies of human life, our violent obsessions with privilege, control and achievement, as arising from the refusal to know and love oneself as a creature, a body.

The contemplative attitude is an integral dimension of the spiritual life and of its way of dialogue and communication. Such an attitude enables us – or should enable us – to filter out the ‘spin’ and superficiality that is so much a part of modern communication. The contemplative heart gives us the ‘distance’ needed for an authentic communication and contextualization in a world overwhelmed by the ‘information super-highway’.

### ***Manipulation of communication technology***

The tragic enigma of modern communication technology is that it can be manipulated precisely to impair and obscure authentic communication.<sup>1</sup> In the field of commerce we have the ubiquity of advertising which seeks to ‘shape’ our needs and responses. In contemporary politics we have the use of what is called ‘spin’: the manicuring of information to suit a particular political agenda or self-interest. In such ways, communication can be used to manipulate a social culture, to be in fact ‘anti-communication’. In the same paper Williams argues that authentic language (verbal, visual *etc*) has to be, of its nature, *open*, open to dialogue. All communication is a form of discourse: each side in an authentic discourse remains open to correction, to learn, to listen. In our modern culture language, discourse, takes many different forms: it is not simply a matter of ‘words’: there are many different forms of communicative action, verbal, visual, symbolic, aural, plastic, pictorial *etc*.

There is an unfinished quality to all communication (even divine)—this quality is, in fact, of the very nature of communication. It is a movement as yet unfinished. The various forms of communicative language or discourse have a fundamentally social origin and intention: all communication is ‘communicative action’. But the various forms of communicative language/action can be (and are) manipulated—especially more so, perhaps, the visual (such as TV news bulletins). Language of communication that is not ‘open’ is being used politically, as a manifestation of power (over the powerless). Communication becomes a means of control, of ideological bondage. Thus the beauty of communication becomes perverted, it is no longer a way that seeks the truth *together*. The same can apply to the language we use about God; it too can be used to manipulate the responses and attitudes of the hear-

ers—as authoritarian non-communication. This, it must be said, is not God’s way of self-communicating; which is kenotic, self-sacrificing, dialogical. The Christian tradition is rich in images that speak to our hearts and shape our faith.

Media can, however, become manipulative in its methodology. This raises serious questions about social integrity, justice and integral human development – and about the nature of truth. Such manipulation of communication also serves to stress, once again, the importance of the contemplative attitude. Perhaps one major apostolic challenge facing us as missionaries of the truth about God, the great communicator, is that of helping people to develop a more critical and creative attitude towards their use of the media. ‘Learning to communicate is learning to listen and contemplate as well as speak. This is especially important for those engaged in evangelization: both silence and word are essential elements, integral to the Church’s work of communication for the sake of a renewed proclamation of Christ in today’s world’ (Benedict XVI, ‘Silence and Word’).

### ***Communication and the religious life***

This brings us to the critical question: how do we understand the relationship between mission and communication for us as Missionaries of the Sacred Heart in our contemporary society? Our mission is communication: *May the Sacred Heart of Jesus be everywhere loved!* But how do we communicate this today?

The foundation of any religious community and its spirituality, is always to be found at the intersection of the twin personal experiences of Spirit and culture. In its best days the religious life has always been about the evangelisation of culture through communication, inculturation and *kenosis* (self-giving). God’s way of communicating is *self-giving*. The genius of religious life is not to be found in *reaction* but in *creation*. Its creativity has been

expressed in the development of new ways of communicating the central message of God's self-giving love for the world. The great founders and foundresses have been extraordinarily creative communicators (think of Francis' use of imagery and gesture). This creativity has always been experienced and expressed in relation to the model of God's self-communication in Jesus and shaped by the charisms (communications) of the Spirit given to the founders.

### *Contemporary challenge of mass media*

Surely the culture that most challenges religious and the Church today is that of mass communications: the media in all of its varieties. The men and women of today are being formed—for good or ill—by the modern media, especially by the visual media (film, TV) and the world of the Internet (the 'information super highway'). As Pope John Paul II has said, the modern media are creating 'new languages, new techniques' and, perhaps most importantly for the work of evangelization, 'a new psychology'.<sup>2</sup> There is a goodness and a search for truth in media with which we must dialogue. But, we need to be able to dialogue with this new *areopagus* in its own language.

An opinion piece by Susan Greenfield, in the *Sydney Morning Herald* of 7<sup>th</sup> August 2012, argues that modern digital culture is 'rewiring our brains'! Is this an element of the 'new psychology' of which John Paul speaks?

Eye contact is pivotal and sophisticated component of human interaction, as is the subconscious monitoring of body language and, most powerful of all, physical contact, yet none of these experiences is available on social networking sites. It follows that if a young brain with the evolutionary mandate to adapt to the environment is establishing relationships through the medium of screen, the skills essential for empathy may not be acquired as naturally as in the past.

The many forms of mass media offer immense opportunities for human solidarity, compassionate information, understanding and dia-

logue—activities of the heart.

But because of their very 'massiveness', anonymity and diversity they can easily 'swamp' individuality, personality and creativity. Is communication becoming 'screen-based' rather than inter-personal? People speak today of 'compassion fatigue' because they just cannot cope with any more exposure to tragedy. So, our hearts can be dulled, our sense of common humanity crushed by the weight of information. And we have already mentioned the ubiquity of the use of 'spin': political, ideological or commercial which is shaping the desires of our hearts.

A spirituality of the heart will seek to nourish a contemplative heart. Thomas Merton once wrote:

Our being is silent, but our existence is noisy. Our actions tend to be noisy, but when they stop there is a ground of silence which is always there. Our job as contemplatives is to be in contact with that ground and to communicate from that level, and not just to be in contact with a stream of activities which are constantly moving. We have to keep silence alive for other people, as well as for ourselves ... because no one else is doing it.. (from *Silence and the Word*)

This is our challenge. How, first of all, do we react, respond, to our own personal use of and exposure to mass media? How do we help others to react and respond in creative and compassionate ways? How do we bring into the interactive world of media the message of the Gospel of love and communion? How can we creatively facilitate and help shape the process of globalized inculturation so that it nourishes and strengthens faith, hope, charity and human dialogue and communion while respecting the integrity of differences? One of the realities that is under 'attack' from some aspects of the globalized mass media today is that of (cultural and social) differences. Such differences, however, are an essential part of the evangelical life; without difference there can be no real communion, simply homogenization.

These are some of the challenges facing

our ministry today. Like our ancestors in the faith, we too have to discover creative ways in which to communicate Christ's message of love and hope. We need to find ways that build up the dignity of people that respect their human integrity and their cultural uniqueness. But we cannot do this from 'outside' or from above, as if we have the answer! We need to reflect on and 'test' our own involvement in, and dialogue with, the world of mass communication. It will only be from within this experience and the intersection of this media-experience with our personal gospel-experience that we will be able to find new creative ways in which to communicate the Gospel today and enter into dialogue with the 'mentality' of the modern age.

### ***Reaction and creativity***

Not all of this experience will be of Chevalier's '*mal moderne*' (modern evil). The wonderful thing about modern communication technology is its immense capacity for good. Certainly we can 'react' but we also need to 'create'. Father Chevalier, as we know, was concerned about the '*mal moderne*' of post-revolutionary France, especially religious indifference and egoism. In some ways he was typically 'reactionary' at this level. But his fundamental insight and charismatic belief was positive and creative: find the best ways to communicate the story of God's wonderful outpouring of love in the Heart of Jesus. If his movement had only been one of reaction it would have died long ago. Chevalier had the breadth of vision necessary to be creative, and the simplicity of faith to take the big risks of communication (such as the mission to New Guinea).

One of the beautiful things about Paul VI's *Evangelii nuntiandi* is its positive and visionary hopefulness. This hopefulness had its roots in his conviction that he, or the Church, did not have all the answers; that the Church needed to dialogue with the modern world—on a level playing field. It is from such dia-

logue that creativity will come. 'The dialogue will make us wise; it will make us teachers' (EN 81).

We are called to be missionaries of the Great Communicator, the Great Lover, who did not hesitate to give of God's own intimate self for the life of the world. In this mission we cannot afford to be 'old-fashioned' in our techniques. At the heart of the ministry of communication lies the mystery of the Incarnation: in order to best communicate God's love to us, God fully became a human being, taking on the 'fashion' of communication in his time. Modern media has a great capacity to portray and challenge our humanity, our values, *our faith*—just as Jesus did in his person and in his works in his own day. The contemporary technology of mass communication invites and challenges us to interact with it, in order to incarnate and inculturate the eternal Gospel for the people of our time for 'a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived' (John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa* 78)

### ***Spirituality of the heart and communication***

Many aspects of the media are about 'spirituality' and 'values' (we see this search reflected in a number of modern movies). In many ways the media world is a world of values and 'spiritualities' (ideologies) – however, it is not morally or spiritually neutral and can be profoundly influential in peoples' lives. We have a message that can assuage spiritual hungers: how do we convey it to people who are looking for answers in so many places of information? Today there are many conflicting messages and panaceas on offer. If we are to communicate our message, our experience, then we must do it in ways relevant to the experiences of contemporary culture. Let us not forget that an essential element in any life-giving spirituality is a *discerning heart*.

If we are to recognize and focus upon the truly important questions, then silence is a pre-

cious commodity that enables us to exercise proper discernment in the face of the surcharge of stimuli and data we receive. Amid the complexity and diversity of the world of communications, however, many people find themselves confronted with the ultimate questions of human existence: Who am I? What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? It is important to affirm those who ask these questions, and to open up the possibility of a profound dialogue, by means of words and interchange, but also through the call to silent reflection, something that is often more eloquent than a hasty answer and permits seekers to reach into the very depths of their being and open themselves to the path toward knowledge that God has transcribed in human hearts. (Benedict XVI, 'Silence and Word').

Knowledge is more than simply the acquiring of information. It is a work of the heart as well as of the mind. The spirituality of the heart is a spirituality of integration, of critical evaluation, of seeking truth. The spirituality of the heart is a spirituality of inculturation: it gives us a context in which to dialogue and communicate. Its model is God's heart-felt way of communicating. Hence, it is also a spirituality of 'distance', a spirituality that offers 'perspective'.

Culturally—especially in the Judaeo-Christian tradition—the 'heart' has always symbolized the centrality of inter-personal relationships of respect and intimacy in the identity of the human person and society. The 'heart' stands for openness to communion and unrestricted-ness in inter-personal communication. The modern media provides us with numerous possibilities for building up and strengthening the bonds of human solidarity and mutual understanding in a spirit of justice, freedom and compassion. Perhaps nothing in our modern world has a greater capacity to 'mould' the feelings and wisdom of the human heart. But, this same medium equally has potential for evil: for the distortion of truth and the manipulation of emotions, for the promotion of division, misunderstanding and val-

ues that are false to the true heart of our humanity.

The struggle between good and evil is being fought out today through the media of communication. Human values and attitudes have always been influenced by the 'symbolic world' of culture. Modern communications—especially visual communications—are reshaping our symbolic world, providing us with new ways of looking at and responding to our environment. A 'new world' is in the making. And we are being challenged, because of our consecration to the centrality of relationships of the heart (of God and of men and women), to participate in the making and shaping of modern humanity's new 'symbolic world'.

Father Chevalier dreamt of a 'new world' in the making, a world and a mentality that would be shaped by God's way of communicating with us. The world of mass communication offers us both a challenge and a way for humanity and God to meet in creative dialogue. It is in the Heart of Jesus that communication becomes creative.

The Heart of God descends in haste to his creation, with the weight of infinite love, and the heart of creation rises towards God drawn by an attraction that dominates all others in it. It is in Jesus that these two hearts meet, and they unite so profoundly that the two hearts become one. (Jules Chevalier)

Throughout the world—especially in what are sometimes called the 'developing' churches—members of our 'Chevalier Family' are involved in various 'media ministries' such as radio, publication, video production and the world of film. But too often this initiative has been 'left to the initiative of individuals or small groups' and has entered 'into pastoral planning only in a secondary way' (*RM* 37). Surely it is now time for us to seriously evaluate the potential and the challenges offered by the culture of globalised communications for an intelligent and creative international ministry based on the spirituality of the Heart of a God whose life and love is communication, of the Heart of a Jesus who totally

embraced and identified himself with the historical human condition. Are we prepared simply to remain only ‘consumers’ of the media, and the technology of the computer generation? As Paul VI said at the beginning of his pontificate: we have a ‘message to deliver’, we have ‘a communication to offer’. Mark Zuckerberg sees the facilitation of communication (Facebook) as a ‘mission’: ‘The thing I really care about is the mission, making the world open’. How do we see our mission today?

To effectively carry out our mission today we must, as a community, enter radically into

the modern world of communications, just as some one hundred years ago Father Chevalier recognized and exploited the potential of cheap print media to spread his message and to publicize his works. This was the means he used to put a ‘new heart’ into a confused and searching world. He was absolutely convinced that God wanted that message spread everywhere and by every means to bring about a ‘new world’. Pope John Paul II addressed this challenge to the members of the 1987 MSC General Chapter: ‘People today all over the world desperately long for a new world and for a new heart to animate and guide it’.

### NOTES

1 ‘The challenge facing social networks is how to be truly inclusive: thus they will benefit from the full participation of believers who desire to share the message of Jesus and the values of human dig-

nity which his teaching promotes.’ (Benedict XVI: ‘Social Networks’)  
2 *Redemptoris missio*, # 37.

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The agent for transmitting the faith is the universal Church, which ‘is really present in all legitimately organized local groups of the faithful’ (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 26). In past decades, the local Churches have done their utmost in this field. It is enough to think of the number of Christians, priests, lay people, catechists, families and communities, groups and ecclesial movements that are spontaneously and freely committed to the proclamation and transmission of the faith. Yet, ‘the cultural climate and the general state of fatigue in many Christian communities in our local Churches is endangering the proclamation of the faith, its transmission to others and instruction in the faith’ (n. 15).

Such a situation requires renewed efforts, fresh zeal, a gift of the Holy Spirit, to proclaim the Good News anew joyfully and vigorously. This is a task for the whole Church and all her members. It is becoming even more urgent, given the challenges of contemporary society.

Today too Christians are called to account for the hope that is in them (cf. 1 Pt 3:15) with a new personal and community style, responding “in gentleness and reverence and a clear conscience” (1 Pt 3:16), with the gentle strength which comes from union with Christ in the Spirit and with the conviction that our goal is a personal encounter with God the Father in his Kingdom’ (n. 16).

Christian witness must be private and public, must embrace thought and action, the internal life of Christian communities and their missionary drive, their educational action, their charitable activity and their presence in contemporary society in order to communicate to them the gift of Christian hope.

—*Press Conference for the Presentation of the ‘Lineamenta’ of ‘The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’, 4 March 2011.*