

# POPE JOHN PAUL II AND CONTEMPORARY MEDIA

## *Integrating Understanding of Media in Culture*

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**S**T POPE JOHN PAUL II was convinced that the Catholic Church and media users or producers could integrate understanding of contemporary media in Christian culture. He said,

It is also necessary to integrate that message into the 'new culture' created by modern communications. 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. Pope John VI said that 'the split between the Gospel and culture is undoubtedly the tragedy of our time,' and the field of communications fully confirms this judgment. (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37c).

He hoped that through integrating features of media into Christian conceptual culture anyone connected to media would be guided towards the positive effects of the media. Throughout his works, Pope John Paul II illustrated ways of going about this: attributing to them biblical epithets, associating them with authentic development of human person, applying to them the communion model of the Church, describing them in terms of features of forum, including silence in means of communication, and ascribing them ethical principles.

John Paul II integrated contemporary media in Christian culture by applying the following biblical epithets to them: fruit of an authentic development, a source of communion, new crossroads, a community, a village and Areopagus (*Redemptoris Missio*,

37). The word Areopagus, for example, referred to the public place in Athens where St. Paul proclaimed messages about the Risen Christ to his audience (Acts 17:22-31). John Paul II encouraged the Church to consider all contemporary media in terms of the modern Areopagus (that is, a new platform, centre, or place to proclaim the Gospel), because he was convinced this was a discourse platform where media users could undergo transformation, a transition, and regeneration. He called this new discourse platform 'Areopagus' because he found in contemporary media an avenue for integrating understanding of culture and of authentic development for the human person, as was the case during the time of St Paul's missionary work in Athens.

Pope John Paul II associated contemporary media with features of authentic human development. According to Dulles, Pope John Paul II stated, 'communication [...] should be used not simply as a means of entertainment and gratification, as in a consumerist culture, but for true human development' (Dulles 2003:8). For me, this was another way Pope John Paul II integrated the understanding of media in conceptual culture. In fact, throughout his writings, Pope John Paul II preferred the concept of human person to that of human being in his understanding of contemporary media (Melady 1999: 42). In doing so, he wished to apply the Christian concept of person (defined in terms of authentic values, dignity and moral truth that people should promote, maintain and attain) to possibilities and opportunities that the

contemporary media could offer. By attributing to the media the Church's understanding of the 'person of Christ' and Christ's communion with God (*Ecclesia in America*, 33), Pope John Paul II clearly set the example of how to integrate an understanding of contemporary media in culture itself in order to inspire positive deploying of contemporary media for evangelization.

According to Dulles, John Paul II drew on *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (1963, 6) to integrate the understanding of media as 'communion', in terms of the Church's culture of conceptual models. Following this view, I noticed that Pope John Paul II adopted the concept 'communion' because it allowed for a better understanding and description of the means of social communications, in the sense that Jesus Christ, in communion with the Father, communicates with God the Father, to make it possible for believers to communicate with God. Pope John Paul II thus suggested that media producers and users could understand media in terms of a person's sacramental communion with others, just as Jesus Christ is in communion with God the Father, and just as the 'Church is built up through sacramental communion with the Son of God' (*Ecclesia de Eucharistia*, 21). Given the above, John Paul II hoped to lend a culture of theological connotations to the means of social communications to offset some of the secular connotations tied to the media lexicon such as source of entertainment or of gratification and of consumerism.

John Paul II also proposed 'new forum' as the conceptual frame to describe media, as he hoped the world could gain a better understanding of contemporary media within the culture of the teachings of the Church (*Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*, 2). In this, John Paul II perceived new instruments of communication as a 'new forum' for integration and transformation of those evangelized or re-evangelized. He added,

Internet is certainly a new 'forum' understood in the ancient Roman sense of that public space



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where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own (*Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*, 2).

He hoped that this integration would increase the Church's visibility on the international scene, amid ongoing challenges orchestrated by phenomena such as globalization, secularization, and other effects that media impact on the Church's evangelization.

John Paul II asked the Church and media producers or users to include non-verbal signs to integrate our understanding of media in culture. Non-verbal signs, proxemics, or absence of interpersonal language, were hitherto counted among kinesics, because social communications are understood in terms of verbal message. However, John Paul II enlarged the horizon of communication in pastoral ministry by including in social communications ways such as silence in all its forms (silent meditation, contemplation, adoration, liturgical silence, etc.). For him, the means of communication were not limited to languages or verbal signs.. Given that media can impact silence (*35th World Communications Day 'Preach from the housetops'*) and meditation, depending upon how Church and media users or producers

integrate these ways of communication, John Paul II called for a broader frame for integrating our understating of contemporary media.

John Paul II also ascribed moral or ethical characters to contemporary media. He said,

Jesus teaches that communication is a moral act: 'A good person brings forth good out of a store of goodness, but an evil person brings evil out of a store of evil. I tell you, on the Day of Judgment people will render an account for every careless word they speak. By your words you will be acquitted, and by your words you will be condemned' (Mt 12:35-37) (Apostolic Letter. *The Rapid Development*, 13).

According to Mugridge and Gannon, John Paul II invited all to consider the functions of contemporary media in terms of ethical codes and the teaching of Jesus Christ (2008: 22-23) in order to ensure their positive contributions to evangelization in the world and the authentic development the human person. John Paul II

invited all to treat and understand media as phenomena marked with moral values (20th World Communications Day '*Social communications and the Christian formation of public opinion*', 1986), because he was convinced that media were not amoral or neutral entities.

Overall, Pope John Paul II's integration of the understanding of media in Christian culture offered us new concepts to overcome the adverse effects of media on missionary endeavours. He applied to the contemporary media connotations of concepts such as authentic development, communion, new forum, space, village, Areopagus, silence, meditation and moral character to broaden the understanding of media. Pope John Paul II allowed evangelization works to parse spheres of contemporary media while he made the media incarnate the culture of conceptual perspectives of the Church.

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—Pope John Paul II, *Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*, 2.