

Values in Social Communication

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In his address to the 2002 Plenary Assembly of the “Pontifical Council for Culture” Pope John Paul II stated that “our contemporaries are submerged in cultural ambiances that are often ignorant of any spiritual or inner dimension, in situations where essentially materialistic aspects prevail.” “Without a doubt,” the Pope continued, “in no other period of history was there such a rupture in the process of the transmission of moral and religious values between generations, which leads to a kind of heterogeneity between the Church and the contemporary world.” For such a situation the Pope sees the greatest challenge for families and school institutions, “which have the onerous task to transmit human, moral and spiritual values to young generations, which will allow them to be men and women who are concerned to lead an upright personal life and to commit themselves to social life.”¹ The Pope could have put the same challenge also to the means of Social Communication. Are they not one of the main movers in transmitting, changing or even obstructing values, especially in the lives of young people?

Social Communication and Values

When we talk about values in Social Communication we have to see the process of social communication as a “sharing of meaning through signs”.² Any communication has a common element between the persons participating where they share information, feelings,

¹ Zenit, News service, Rome March 19, 2002.

² Franz-Josef Eilers: *Communicating in Community. An Introduction to Social Communication*. 3rd Edition. Manila 2002, p. 23.

ideas etc. through commonly understandable signs. It was the Second Vatican Council which created the expression "*Social Communication*." The preparatory Committee for the Council document *Inter Mirifica* on social communication stated in a foot note to the first paragraph of the document to be discussed that in their understanding expressions like Mass Media, Diffusion Media, Audio-visual means or similar would not be enough to express what the Church is concerned about. Therefore they proposed a new expression *Social Communication* which was accepted and used from then on in Church documents, without any further discussion or clarification.³ This new expression refers in my understanding to all ways and means of communication of and in human society. It therefore includes traditional ways of communication as well as Mass Media and new developments of media and multimedia communication via computers and the Internet.

Regardless which of these different means of society ('social'!) we consider they all are related to values in two ways: they 'transmit' values by implanting, enforcing or also threatening them but at the same time social communication itself, i.e. the way we communicate and use the means of communication, is also influenced and shaped by values of society. Thus in traditional communications the values of a given community or culture are expressed in the different ways people communicate with each other on the interpersonal as well as the inter-societal level. The way children speak and communicate with their parents or with each other do express and are determined by values given to it by e.g. Filipino culture. Thus the role the "kuya" plays between his siblings is an expression of Filipino/Asian values reflected in this way of communicating. He will never be addressed by his brothers and sisters simply as Joseph or John but always as "Kuya Joseph, Kuya John". Traditional dances are another example. They are not just pure entertainment but express and reflect to quite an extent values of a given culture to marriage, or working like harvesting and other social life. Such dances reflect e.g. how men treat women and how to court and to relate to each other for a common life in marriage and family.

³ Cf. Franz-Josef Eilers: *Social Communication. The Development of a Concept*. In: Franz-Josef Eilers: *Communicating in Community*. 3rd ed. Appendix A. Manila 2002. p. 311-318.

With the technical developments in communication and the coming (and going?) of the Mass Media in the 20th century the situation changed in many ways: Mass Media reflect values which were partly different from traditional ones, they are partly taken from other cultures and in a growing way determined through the globalization of these means. In a strong but also sometimes subtle way they can strengthen but also threaten values of people. Since values are not necessarily universal but very much determined by local cultures⁴ globalized Mass Media can be to quite an extent a real threat.

Values and Mass Media

Values in society are described as “guiding lights that show a person which way s/he should go. They are standards by which the individual decides his/her relations with: (1) Himself, (2) With other people with whom s/he interacts, (3) Machines that produce commodities s/he needs, (4) Nature around him and finally (5) God who is supposed to help her/him attain salvation.”⁵

Which are the “guiding lights” presented by our Mass Media to help people to relate to the different environments they are placed in? A glance into our newspapers, Radio, TV and films shows that it is in a growing way less the concern for values and building society which determine their content and their operations. Very often it seems to be more the financial gain and power which determines them. Newspapers, even those considering themselves serious, become more and more sensationalized and ‘Tsismis’ oriented. All kinds of suspicions and opinions are presented as ‘hard’ news where in reality there might be not sufficient evidence yet. It is revealing to compare e.g. the banner headlines of broad sheets from the same day: often the standards of objectivity and the respect for human dignity and privacy are violated. Not to talk about tabloids who mostly feast on sex and violence in word and pictures to sell and

⁴ Cf. *Values, World View and Perception*. In: Franz-Josef Eilers: *Communicating between Cultures. An Introduction to Intercultural Communication*. 2nd Ed., Manila 1992, pp. 96-111.

⁵ K.S.Sitaram/Roy K.Cogdel In: Franz-Josef Eilers: *Communicating between Cultures*. 2nd Ed., Manila 1992, p. 96.

make money but not to serve people or help them in keeping and strengthening their values. Our films and in a growing way even our TV programs are saturated with sex and violence. If this way the real values of culture, society and faith are neglected are we astonished that the daily reality of our lives, of our communities and societies become more and more violence and sex oriented? "Life is cheap" and even those who are supposed to protect it seem to loose their values...

Professional Standards

If values are supposed to be "guiding lights" in our lives they have to be nourished and developed and this is exactly also the obligation of those being responsible for the Mass Media and the other means of Social Communication. With their fascination of technology, their vast and rapid distribution systems for a mass of people they also have a special responsibility. It is very revealing that there is a worldwide growing concern and interest in the ethics of communication. The Vatican *Pontifical Council for Social Communications* has published in the last years three documents on Ethics in Advertising (1997), Ethics in Communications (2000) and Ethics in Internet (2002). Beyond that there are unfortunately mostly non-church related authors and organizations who are professionally concerned and in a scholarly way specialize in this field.

It was the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, UNESCO, which published already 1978 a Media Declaration referring to professional standards.⁶ Almost all professional communication organizations have over the years developed a 'Code of Conduct'. Thus June 21 last year (2001) the Japanese Newspaper and Publishers Association "Nihon Shimbun Kyokai" published a "Canon of Journalism" which was prepared by a committee of chairmen and editors in chief of 12 different newspaper companies. The main elements of this canon are the following⁷:

⁶ In: Eilers, *Community*. 3rd Ed., pp. 107 to 109.

⁷ In: Eilers, *Community*. 3rd Ed., pp. 122 ff.

1. *The right to freedom of speech and expression*; without such a right the media can not fulfill their role in society because “the public’s right to know is a universal principle that sustains a democratic society”.

2. *This freedom demands a special responsibility*: “In a modern society flooded with a vast range of information, the public is constantly required to make correct and swift decisions on what is true and which information to select. It is the responsibility of member newspapers to respond to such requirements and fulfill their public and cultural mission through accurate and fair reporting, and through responsible commentaries.”

3. *Reporting must be accurate and fair* and should “never be swayed by the reporter’s personal connection or bias.”

4. *Newspapers and their reporters should be independent* rejecting “interference from any outside forces” but also be willing to give other opinions “provided such opinions are accurate, fair and responsible.” In our Filipino situation we often experience also in so-called serious newspapers a lack of distinction between advertising and real news. Especially in business or consumer section of papers “news” very often is in reality the text of the advertising or Public Relations department of a given company, which is reprinted without any further comment, frequently matched by an advertisement of the same company in the same paper.

5. *Outmost respect should be paid to the dignity of human beings* by newspapers and all other Mass Media organizations. They should “put a high value on individual’s honor and give serious consideration to their right of privacy.” I am not so sure if such a principle, which is deeply rooted in Asian cultures, is respected when our media parade suspect criminals with their names as presented by the police before any trial has proven their guilt.

6. “*Decency both editorially and in the area of advertising and in their circulation practices*” is the final requirement of this Japanese canon of Journalism which is not from a church organization! They are required to “at all times exercise moderation and good sense.”

Pornography and Violence

In describing values in culture anthropologists and sociologists often classify values into primary, secondary and tertiary values. Primary values of one might be only secondary or tertiary in another culture. In all Asian and many other cultures the importance of family is a primary value. But if we once again look at our reality this seems to become more and more a lip service also in our means of communication. Pornography which is exactly the opposite of the value of family and marriage is rampant and a multi billion business. The Pontifical Council for Social Communications has published already May 7, 1989 "a pastoral response" to "Pornography and violence in the Communications Media."⁸ There pornography is defined as "a violation... of the right to privacy of the human body in its male or female nature... which reduces the human person and human body to an anonymous object of misuse for the purpose of gratifying concupiscence." (No. 9) The document further states that "a fundamental message of pornography and violence is disdain, the consideration of others as objects rather than persons," which "eats away tenderness and compassion and can foster insensitivity or even brutality." (No. 18). "The more sexual activity is considered as a continuing frenzied search for personal gratification rather than as an expression of enduring love in marriage, the more pornography can be considered as a factor contributing to the undermining of wholesome family life." (16). It is what I call the "pornographic mind" which threatens the values of family, community and friendship. With a "pornographic mind" we cannot any more see the real value and the holiness of sexuality and especially the sexual act which also constitute the sacrament of marriage. It is this "pornographic mind" which finally destroys relationships which are supposed to be build on mutual trust and openness and not on possessing each other.

It should be our special concern to be aware of the presence and absence of values in our social communication and this refers not only to the mass media but also to our interpersonal and group communication.

⁸ In: Franz-Josef Eilers (ed): *Church and Social Communication. Basic Documents*. 2nd Edition, Manila 1997, pp. 137-147.

Globalization and Consumerism

Another threat to our values which very often is supported through the means of social communication and by globalization is a growing consumerism and materialism which is promoted and made fashionable this way. Globalization as such is not automatically bad, as Pope John Paul II tells us, but it also brings a special challenge to our Christian and cultural values. The Pope addressed this recently in his speech to the new Filipino ambassador at the Vatican Mr. Francisco A. Alba on the occasion of his accreditation on February 8, 2002: "The increasing globalization of the economy, with its leveling of cultural differences, is not necessarily and in every case a solution to real needs. In fact, it can aggravate the imbalances already evident in the relations between those who benefit from the world's growing capacity to produce wealth and those who are left at the margin of progress.

The great moral challenge facing nations and the international community is to combine development with solidarity – in a genuine sharing of benefits – in order to overcome both dehumanizing underdevelopment and the 'over development' which considers people as mere economic units in a consumer system (cf. EA 32).

Development therefore is never a merely technical or economic question; it is fundamentally a human and moral question. It requires an enhanced sense of moral commitment on the part of those who serve the common good. The question today is often whether the dominant culture can set economic and political life within a genuinely moral framework in order to ensure that the common good is served."⁹ Such a "moral framework" in reality means a framework of values and our question is once again: are such values reflected and promoted in our means of communications or are they more concerned about their income and profit? Do they really serve the common good and the ability of the individual to distinguish and grow or to give in to fashion and materialism in such a way that basic values of life and community are neglected?

There is also the fact that values change over time and are not necessarily permanent or like museum's pieces which can not be touched. The strong influence of Mass Media and the economic

⁹ In: *L'Osservatore Romano*. English Edition, February 13, 2002, p. 5.

pressure easily also contribute to a change in the priorities of values or even substitute some of them. Values of young people today are, also in so called traditional and Christian societies different in strength and design from let's say 40 years ago. Bishop Teodoro Bacani referred to this recently in one of his weekly editorials in a daily newspaper.¹⁰

Based on a national survey of young people in the Philippines today he reports a disturbing picture especially for Christian faith and the Catholic Church in the Philippines. "According to the survey," he writes, "88 percent of young people believe in God or in a Supreme Being; 76% affiliate themselves with the Catholic Church; 42% believe in heaven; 21% believe there is hell; 73% trust priests, and 70% trust nuns. What do these figures imply, assuming they indicate the true state of affairs? First, the majority of our young people no longer believe in the basics of the Catholic faith, like life after death, heaven and hell. Hence, they are either not being taught these basic truths, or if they are taught these, they have not accepted them... Second, if 88% believe in God or a Supreme Being, it means that 12% – a significant minority of young people – are either atheists or agnostics. This is a big leap from the almost 100% theism of the Filipinos up to recent years... Third, there will be a downtrend in Catholic Church membership in the future... Let us go back to the percentages of those who believe there is an afterlife (21%), heaven (42%), and hell (21%)... I cannot figure out how only 21% believe in the afterlife when 42% believe there is heaven. Nevertheless, it is clear that the majority of our young people do not believe in the afterlife, in a heaven or hell. In other words, secularism, the doctrine which says that there is no life beyond this world, has taken over the minds of our young people. Secularism is now the dominant world view. Our young people live their lives within an exclusively this-world horizon..."

Asian Values

If we ask ourselves how human, Christian and especially Asian values can and should be expressed and how they should also be

¹⁰ Teodoro Bacani: *Figures to Disturb the Church*. In: Today, Manila, January 24, 2002.

'guiding lights' for the means of Social Communication we might look at a summary of Asian values which Dr. Florangel R. Braid, the president of the "Asian Institute of Journalism and Communication" developed some years ago.¹¹ She based her study on the work of some Asian Communication scholars but also on other Asian thinkers and religions like Taoism, Islam, Buddhism and Christianity. In her summary she is concerned about a "more human communication system which will lessen the growing de-humanization of our technological age." Her underlying concern corresponds also to the Vatican documents on Ethics in Advertising, Communication and the Internet where the basic fundamental ethical principle is expressed with the following words: "The human person and human society are the end and measure of the use of media in social communication" (8).

Braid sees the following attributes and values as needed in Asia for a balanced and responsible communication. Communication in Asia in this understanding should be:

1. Participatory, in the sense that it allows wider access to and use of communication facilities by many groups of society;
2. Non-exploitative, in that communication will not be used to protect and preserve interests of the privileged;
3. Decentralized, in that it allows for growth of small media and the integration of non-traditional and folk media with new communication technology;
4. Democratized, because owners of media will come from a broad spectrum of the population. Likewise, management boards would include representatives from various groups;
5. Interactive, because it permits the bottom-up, top-down, and the horizontal and continuing two-way flow of communication and information;

¹¹ Florangel R. Braid: *NWICO Value Concepts and Philippine Communication Issues*. In: Crispin Maslog (ed): *Communication, Values and Society*. New Edition. Manila New 1994, p. 87.

6. Non-coercive, because the State will not interfere in the attainment of freedom of information. It will, however, provide policies for developing structures that will allow people to express their needs and aspirations;

7. Non-confrontational, since it promotes non-zero sum strategy for resolving conflict. Instead of the usual win-lose strategy, it encourages 'win-win' and sharing; and

8. Intrapersonal emphasis, in that it seeks to deepen inner consciousness and communication with the self. This sense of wholeness will result in... love and sharing with others and will lead to a humanized, egalitarian and cooperative society."

Role of Mass Media in Society

Values are expressed but also shaped by Social Communication and especially the Mass Media. In the long history of studies on the effects of Mass Media on people and societies, how they shape but also can threaten their values and their world View there was a time where the Mass Media were considered almost omnipotent. They 'injected' their messages into their recipients who became defenseless victims of this well defined and prepared 'messages'. Later studies, however, became more specific and discriminating. Today the role of the Mass Media in shaping values is more differentiated and very much depending also on other additional circumstances and the cultural and societal environment.

Dennis McQuail has summarized the possible role of Mass Media in society in the following way¹²: "Mass Media can –

- cause intended change
- cause unintended change
- cause minor change (form or intensity)
- facilitate change (intended or not)
- Reinforce what exists (no change)
- Prevent change.

¹² Dennis McQuail: *Mass Communication Theory*. 4th Edition. London 2000, p. 424.

Any of these changes may occur at the level of the individual, society, institution or culture.” This means that the role of the Mass Media in changing and determining values is not as clear and determined as we normally think. It depends very much on a whole group of circumstances which very often can not that easily be defined.

On the other hand it also means that we are not powerless and totally victims of the means of communications. We can shape and influence our environment and our attitudes in such a way that they play a positive and supportive role or at least can challenge us to be firmer in our convictions and the defense of our personal and traditional values.

George Gerbner and others have further pointed to the fact that Mass Media serve as “*Cultural Indicators*.” The content of the media reflects in this understanding the state of a culture and society. If e.g. there are more reports on violence today than 10 years ago it indicates that our society has become more violent; if there are more reports on religion and religious practices today than 10 years ago it might indicate that our culture has become more conscious of Religion and religious practices. In this understanding studies and research would compare the presentation of values at different times but may be also in different cultures and/or different media and draw consequences from them.

Conclusion

From all this we see that there are different possibilities and approaches to relate Social Communication and especially the Mass Media to our values. It probably depends very much on us “consumers” but also on our priorities in communicating how the relation between values and our ways and means of communication are shaped. Last school year some of my students in the UST Graduate School program for an MA in Theology with specialization in Pastoral Communication have developed a Christian Communication model which is different from the usual “Sender-Message-Receiver” model of communication scholars. In such models the Sender “calls the shots” and determines to quite an extent the content of the message, the presentation and the intended effect on the receiver. In

our new 'Christian Communication Model' it is not the sender who stays central but rather the message: Here the Sender is somehow 'downgraded' to a messenger and fully dependent on the message which stays central. The messenger reflects the message and is just an instrument for the message. The more s/he 'reflects' this message the more s/he will be a real communicator in the Christian understanding. Such an approach means for us in considering the relation between values and communication that the more we listen to the message of God's Word and are filled by His presence the more His values will shape our own lives, societies and thus also their (social!) communication! The more our communication reflects and realizes God's communication the more the values of His Kingdom will become essential elements in our lives and society. The more they shape personal, interpersonal but also the communication and values of our cultures and societies – including the Mass Media and those responsible in them – the more we build a society beyond violence and egoism, beyond pornography and consumerism. □