

Journalism Ethics in Pastoral Communication Perspective: The Case of the Philippine Press

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The paper tackles journalism ethics under the perspective of pastoral communication, particularly in the context of the Philippine press. It identifies the deep connection between secular press ethics and Christian ethics. It covers cases that raised serious ethical questions among print journalists within the past 10 years. The study is qualitative, making extensive use of library research, interviews, and actual experiences by the author, who has been a newsman for a decade now.

The study confronts the idea that Christian ethics is best left to religion, while secular ethics best serves journalism in general. On the contrary, journalism ethics can be seen with greater clarity under the perspective of pastoral communication.

The paper has three main parts. The first one discusses journalism ethics as generally seen and practiced by the secular media. The second part presents how ethics is viewed in the Christian perspective. It describes how communication theology and moral theology provide a more meaningful approach to ethics, which can nourish its practice in journalism. The third part introduces a new model for journalism ethics for the Philippine press. The model traces journalism ethics and practice to God who communicates in Trinity and began the communication process with man in Revelation. The model is then applied in actual cases that posed ethical dilemmas among Filipino journalists.

The study argues that journalism ethics, especially in Catholic countries like the Philippines, should be seen and practiced in light of Christian ethics. It must be founded on the cardinal virtues, and be guided by the “protonorms of communication ethics.” In the end, journalists will realize that their role goes beyond fame and recognition or the politics and commercial considerations of their profession. They are essentially pastoral

communicators who radiate the Christian values and serve as instruments toward the greater unity and brotherhood of man.

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Journalism can be described in many ways—an enterprise, industry, advocacy, mentality, profession, or even vocation—depending on how its practitioners, audience, and other stakeholders choose to see it.

Journalists operate by a particular discipline, which requires them to be accurate, fair, balanced, and conscientious in their reportage. Along the way, they are faced with a variety of situations that raise ethical dilemmas. How they deal with these challenges depends largely on how they see themselves as journalists and on the strength of their character.

In the Philippines, quite common are complaints about excesses by the press: invasion of privacy, putting statements out of context, turning personal tragedy into a media circus, bowing down to corporate pressure, and even corruption. They happen, critics say, despite the country's strong claim as being predominantly Catholic.

The apparent dissonance between Catholic values and the practice of journalism probably has to do with how ethics is viewed in the secular press. This study puts forward a new perspective—journalism as a form of pastoral communication. It identifies the deep connection between secular press ethics and Christian ethics.

The analysis covered actual cases in the newsroom and in the field that posed ethical dilemmas. Cases came from practicing journalists with at least three years of experience. They were interviewed using a questionnaire. Cases also included actual experiences of this researcher, who has been print journalist for a decade now.

The study identifies areas where Church documents on social communication can be applied in the local press, as well as principles of pastoral communication that can assist journalists both in their professional and personal work. It also outlines ways on how the Church can provide pastoral care for journalists, a subject often ignored in many parishes.

The study is qualitative in nature, making use of library research, interviews, and actual experiences by the researcher.

There are fine differences with the way journalism ethics is seen in the secular and pastoral perspective. In the former, ethics, in general, is often described as “the science of morals,” morals being about distinguishing “between right and wrong.”¹ It is also defined as the “conscious reflection of our moral beliefs with the aim of improving, extending, or refining those beliefs in some way.”² A distinction is made between morality and ethics: “While morality refers to behavior that is socially acceptable, ethics deals with the criteria by which decisions about right and wrong are made.”³

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The study argues that journalism ethics, especially in predominantly Catholic countries like the Philippines, should be seen, taught, and practiced in the light of Christian ethics. It must be founded on the cardinal virtues, from which flows the “protonorms of communication ethics.”

Protonorms in this respect refer to the original (“proto”) principles underlying all communication ethics regardless of color or race. Their application is based on the premise that interpersonal communication is the only paradigm for “all acts of genuine communication,” including those facilitated by the mass media.⁴ The protonorms of communication ethics are classified into four: non-violence, truthfulness, human dignity, and social justice.

Ethics in the Christian perspective is seen in the context of moral theology, specifically that human acts should be according to God’s plan. Communication ethics, in particular, is rooted on the reality of the communicating God. All communication would not have been possible without the Creator himself initiating the process, primarily through Revelation and Incarnation, with the

¹ Venkat Iyer, ed., *Media Ethics in Asia: Addressing the Dilemmas in the Information Age* (Singapore: Stamford Press, 2002), 1.

² Lawrence Hinman. *Ethics: A Pluralistic Approach to Moral Theory*, 3rd ed. (Canada: Wadsworth, 2003), 5.

³ Philip Seib and Kathy Fitzpatrick, *Journalism Ethics* (Florida: Hardcourt Brace and Company, 1997), 3.

⁴ Michael Traber, “Protonorms of Communication Ethics,” in *Communication Theology from Missiological Perspectives in India, October 30 to November 1, 2003*, 1.

Word becoming Flesh and continuing to dwell in human society in the here and now. The reality is best captured through the prism of communication theology, which “sees the whole of theology under the perspective of communication.”⁵ In the Christian perspective, journalists are seen primarily as communicators whose task is inspired by no less than Jesus Christ, “the perfect communicator.” They are reminded, too, of the profound meaning of communication, which is “the giving of the self in love.”⁶

A new Christian journalism ethics model, one that puts God in the equation, is hereby proposed.

The model is founded on the cardinal virtues (prudence, fortitude, temperance, justice), which are the bedrock of all human virtues.

The exercise of cardinal virtues is a prerequisite in the suggested model. But in doing so, journalists are not expected to produce the desired results right away, all the time. Often they are also hindered by structural or organizational limitations that come with the profession. Reporters, in particular, can only do so much. Editors, despite their powers in the newsrooms, can also be weighed down by decisions of their superiors, including those of media owners.

But this is not to say that they cannot work within or even around the built-in handicap. A sense of prudence, for instance, will tell a reporter not to take advantage of a subject’s misfortune by squeezing quotes out of the person despite his or her condition.

Prudence will also dictate that a journalist—reporter or editor—is not supposed to accept gifts with impunity because sooner or later, the practice would affect the way he sees things and eventually, his journalistic output.

In the Philippine situation where inter-personal relations often blur professional boundaries, the challenge is more considerable. Journalists know they should strike a rapport with a source to gain his confidence and turn him into a useful resource person for a story later on. Politicians, for instance, do the same. But they do so only in pursuit of a good press or, in many cases, to avoid a bad one. Thus, it is not uncommon for sources to shower journalists with gifts on just about any occasion imaginable. While they may be well-meaning in many cases, journalists still need to guard against losing that professional distance with his

⁵ Franz-Josef Eilers. *Communicating in Ministry and Mission*, 3rd ed. (Manila: Logos, 2009), 13.

⁶ *Communio et Progressio*, 11.

source. A prudent journalist will “discern (his) true good in every circumstance and choose the right means of achieving it.”⁷

From the cardinal virtues in the ethics model emanate the protonorms of communication. Together, the cardinal virtues and the protonorms enlighten journalism ethics and inspire journalists to become pastoral communicators and essentially, better persons and communicators.

As pastoral communicators, journalists are expected to: (1) be present when others need us most; (2) bear witness to the values of Jesus in relating with people; (3) bring people into the communion and community for being a leaven to society; (4) give life to others in love and selfless service (“*diakonia*”); (5) help people find answers to their search for meaning in life, their way to God and the Lord; and (6) be companions in communicating with people.⁸

In the end, journalists will realize that their role goes beyond fame and recognition or the politics and commercial considerations of their profession. They are essentially pastoral communicators who radiate the Christian values and serve as instruments toward the greater unity and brotherhood of man.

Unity and brotherhood here do not mean a blind acceptance of injustices, irregularities and other problems confronting man. On the contrary, they demand fidelity to the truth, a painstaking adherence to accuracy, and a clear view of the role of social communications where media are but one component.■



⁷ CCC, 1806.

⁸ Ibid., 15.