

Exploring Guidelines for the Communications Ministry

by Fr. Joseph Palakeel

A ministry at the service of all other ministries

Ever since the publication of *Inter Mirifica* by the Second Vatican Council, the Catholic Church has channeled resources to make the most of the power of the communication media for the service of the Gospel. The 40th World Communications Day Message by Pope Benedict XVI entitled *The Media: A Network for Communication, Communion and Cooperation* (2006) has re-emphasized the need to harness the power of the media as an "influential and appreciated resource for building the civilization of love" (nn. 1, 4) through "a constructive presence and a positive perception of the media in society".

The Pope is proposing to make the media "a network of communication, communion and cooperation". For this, he has proposed three steps:

- (a) "Formation in the responsible and critical use of the media" and in the "impact upon the mind of new vocabulary and of images";
- (b) "Participation in the mass media... as a good destined for all people"; and
- (c) "the promotion of dialogue through the exchange of learning, the expression of solidarity" (nn. 3-4). This vision is foundational to Catholic communication ministry.

1. Communication ministry in the Church

In the last 40 years, communication ministry has claimed for itself an important role in the Church. This is especially because of the insistence of the pastoral instruction *Aetatis Novae* to "develop specific pastoral plans for social communications itself" at all levels of the Church.¹

After listing the elements of a pastoral plan for communication, *Aetatis Novae* lays out specific "Guidelines for Designing Pastoral Plans for Social Communications in a Diocese, Episcopal Conference or Patriarchal Assembly" (AN, n. 24) and even details the process (AN, nn. 25ff.). This has inspired the organization of communication ministry at diocesan and national

levels, the opening of many communication centres and the initiation of communication formation for pastoral personnel.

One of the latest contributions of significance in this respect comes in the form of the Guidelines for Communication Ministry in the Missionary Society of St Thomas the Apostle (MST).² It is a 25-page document (www.mstworld.org/Subpages/DC/Guidelines.pdf) which enunciates the theological vision, formation strategy and administrative norms for communication ministry in the missions, "providing inspiration and guidance coupled with clarity of vision and continuity of action".

Basing itself on the recent developments in communication theology and communication studies, the document pioneers an integral "communication vision" for the pastoral-missionary apostolate in contemporary conditions.

The clarity of theological principles, the specificity of programme and the vision of communication ministry as a ministry at the service of all the other apostolic activities make this document an extraordinary pastoral-missionary plan for social communications.

2. The theological foundations

The theological vision of the Guidelines is drawn from the emerging communication theology perspectives on Revelation, Church and Mission in relation to the communication revolution and its cultural implications. From a communication theology perspective, religion is all about communication between God and humanity and among people themselves. Religions have always used the best communication media and strategies of each era; religious meanings are made, preserved and transmitted through verbalizations (oral, written and printed texts), visible symbolizations such as rituals, symbols, art, icons and architecture, and above all through theological reflection.

This is all the more true of Christianity: "Communication is at the core of the Christian understanding of God, man and the world".

2.1. Christianity as communication

Creation and revelation, reaching the climax in Incarnation, constitute the self-communication ad extra of a God who is a Trinity or communion of persons through mutual self-communication. Accordingly, the ministry and mission of the Church is to make ever present and real God's self-communication to the ends of the earth and time.

The Church accomplishes this through her proclamation, caring service and living in community as a universal sacrament of salvation.

Thus, communicating the Word of God (God's Self-communication) is the central mission of the Church and hence, a more communicative Church means a more missionary and pastoral Church. All her ministries are intended to make this communication effective, while

communication ministry itself should be at the service of all other ministries.

2.2. Evangelization as communicating life

St. John says that God's revelation is the "word of life", "the eternal life... made visible to us" in Jesus Christ, and the proclamation of this Good News is intended to bring everyone to fellowship with one another and with the Trinity so all may have the fullness of life (I Jn 1:1-4).

The explicit goal of God's self-communication is to give life: "I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly" (Jn 10:10). The essence of mission is to communicate life.

To evangelize means to promote the communion of people through the proclamation of values of the kingdom. This calls for a comprehensive perspective on mission and ministry: the missionary or pastoral apostolate is not limited to the religious-spiritual dimension; rather it is aimed at the holistic liberation of every human being and the universe itself into the freedom of the children of God, created in the image and likeness of God who is communication and communion.

2.3. Theology of pastoral missionary communication

Grounding itself on an integral perspective of theology, communication and mission, the MST Guidelines list three basic principles of any communication ministry in the Church. Pastoral/missionary communication should:

- be grounded in the ad intra and ad extra communicative relationship within the Trinity, modelled after Jesus, the perfect communicator, and guided by the Holy Spirit who is the communicative element in revelation and salvation;
- flow from the essential vision and mission of the Church as a communicating community (communion) and be in accordance with the nature of man as the image and likeness of God who is communication; and
- follow God's strategy of communication in creation, revelation and Incarnation. It should be adapted to time and place, receiver-centred, multi-sensorial, natural, symbolic, participatory and leading to communion.

3.3. Priority to formation

In the period when the instrumental view of communication prevailed, Church communicators focused on the production/procurement and distribution of communication resources used in ministry and mission.

However, the media explosion and marketing trends have prompted churches to shift the thrust of communication ministry more and more to publicity-generation and public relations.

But the integral theological perspective on communication demands all pastoral personnel to be communication experts, in the sense of being master communicators rather than technical experts. This makes communication formation of pastoral personnel and all the faithful in the

media culture the primary task of the communication ministry, without neglecting the other aspects of public relations and production.

Formation itself is not to be understood as just training in the critical use of media or skills of media analysis; rather, pastoral formation in communication should focus on the emerging new language and new culture shaping the emerging world views by constructing new means generating novel ways of self-expression.

3.4. Focus on communication strengths

The multimedia and multisensorial communication made possible by the digital revolution offers unique possibilities for reinforcing the inherent communication strengths of the Church. Making the Church more communicative is done through the strengthening and revitalizing of the communication strengths of the Church throughout the centuries — manuscripts, books and other texts, art and architecture, signs, symbols and sacraments, rituals, festivals and popular piety.

4. A master plan for communication ministry

The above theological vision of the Guidelines makes it a unique master plan for communication ministry in contemporary culture. The document speaks about missionary and pastoral communication strategies and programmes. It is fine-tuned to the primary charism of MST, namely, *mission ad gentes*, or communicating the Gospel to all creation so that all may have life in abundance. Second in importance, and contributing to the first, is generation and animation of missionary consciousness in the existing Christian communities, which ensures continued missionary enthusiasm and support. All the communication activities, such as formation and training, production and distribution, publicity generation and public relations, organization and administration, are aligned to these two primary goals of *mission ad gentes* and missionary animation. The solid foundation of communication theology, the integral view of communication in mission, priority given to formation and contextual approach to strategy make the Guidelines a valuable document on communication ministry in mission. In addition the document meets all the requirements of a pastoral plan for communication as envisaged by the Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae*, nn. 23-33. It therefore deserves wider attention.

The innovative theological vision of communication and the visualization of communication ministry as a ministry at the service of all the other apostolic activities, coupled with an action plan and formation strategy, make the Guidelines an appropriate "communication vision" for the pastoral-missionary apostolate in the 21 century.

Notes:

¹ Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae*, Rome, 1992, n. 21ff. "More than a quarter century after the promulgation of the Second Vatican Council's Decree on Social Communications, *Inter Mirifica*, and two decades after the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications wishes to reflect on the pastoral implications of this situation" (AN, n. 1).

² The Missionary Society of St. Thomas the Apostle (MST) is an indigenous missionary Society, founded in 1968 in Kerala, India, devoted to mission *ad gentes* as its primary charism. MST has 284 priest members and over 100 seminarians and works in less-Christian and non-Christian areas in India and beyond. For detailed information on MST see: www.mstworld.org. To read and/or download the Guidelines visit: [http:// www.mstworld.org/Subpages/DC/Guidelines.pdf](http://www.mstworld.org/Subpages/DC/Guidelines.pdf)

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