

The Urgent Call to Evangelization

Using the Electronic Media to Proclaim Christ

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At the heart of Christianity is the duty to proclaim the Gospel. The farewell message of Christ to His disciples was to proclaim the good news of salvation to the whole world.

Needless to say, most of the world is not yet Christian and, in fact, has not even heard the teachings of Christ. What we are now facing, however, is not just a further need to continue proclaiming Jesus Christ. It is an urgent duty and, we might say, the most pressing obligation to evangelize the world in all the twenty centuries of Christian history. The burden of this presentation will be to prove this thesis. Never before, since the first Pentecost Sunday, have believers in Christ had a more grave obligation to proclaim Christ to what is still, in large measure, a Christ-less world. "What is the dimension that has entered modern history to make evangelization so imperative? It is the invention of the electronic media of communication. The Second Vatican Council does not hesitate to call them productions of divine providence which have immense power "for propagating and consolidating the kingdom of God." At the same time the Church knows that these media "can have such compelling power that people, especially if they are not prepared, may scarcely be able to recognize it or control it, or when necessary, to reject it" (*Inter Mirifica*, 4).

This article will focus on both aspects of the modern media of communication. Our first stress is on the use of these media to exploit the philosophy of secularism to the incalculable damage of whole nations that had once been faithfully Christian. Our second and main focus is to begin to explore the breathtaking potential of the modern media to teach the whole world what Christ told His Father, "This is eternal life, that they may know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ Whom you have sent" (John 17:3).

Before we look at the damaging and the sublime potential for evangelization of the modern media, we should look briefly at the impact which the media have had in shaping human thought over the centuries.

Communication Revolutions Before Modern Times

There have been three revolutionary stages in media development to the beginning of the twentieth century. Each stage had gigantic implications for religion, and especially for divinely revealed religion, over the millennia.

The first stage of development was the rise of literacy. Pre-literate society has also been called tribal. Its members communicated (and communicate because they still are pre-literate) by word of mouth and they received by word of ear. One effect is the high sensitivity they develop not only in speech and sound, but in taste and touch, which serve to complement the spoken word in all that one person wishes to say to another. The advent of writing opened the door to the communication of God's revealed word in the Bible,

In the meantime, however, there had to be a second stage of communication development in the discovery of phonetic writing. This meant that for the first time in history man could express his thoughts by means of single sounds expressed in a few easily remembered written forms. With the rise of the alphabet, some twenty to thirty

letters became the raw material for expressing tens of thousands of ideas, depending on the combination which these letters assumed. As noted before, this opened the door for the Holy Spirit to communicate the treasures of His infinite wisdom through the Sacred Scriptures.

Some three millennia later, the discovery of printing introduced a new revolution into Christian history. The founders of Protestantism practically identified God's revealed word with the Bible. The Protestant reformers were not slow to use the printed word to disseminate their understanding of Christianity.

It took somewhat longer for Catholics to capitalize on printed communication to evangelize and catechize their contemporaries. But once they did, the floodgates of apostolic zeal broke loose in an avalanche of books and periodicals, pamphlets and brochures – in the millions – to spread the word of God in all the literate nations of the world.

The Negative Impact of the Media on Christianity

It would take an Augustine to do justice to the crisis in which Christianity finds itself today. Whole nations once strongly Christian, have not only abandoned their faith in Christ as their God and Savior, they have shaped the very laws of their countries in direct contradiction to the teachings of Jesus Christ and the Church which He founded.

By now volumes have been written to explain this phenomenon. There is no simple explanation. But surely one of the main contributing causes has been the discovery of the modern media. The Second Vatican Council identified these media as "the press, the cinema, radio, television and others of like nature. These can rightly be called the means of social communication."

The same council recognizes that these media, for all their potential as channels of grace, can be used "in ways that are contrary to the Creator's design and damaging to (man) himself. Indeed she grieves with a mother's sorrow for the harm all too often inflicted all society by their misuse" (*Inter Mirifica*, 1 & 2).

Much has been written to analyze the devastating impact of the mass media on the Christian faith of millions. Behind this influence is the simple fact that those who control the media in large measure have the political and financial power, of a practical monopoly. One of the most uncompromising statements to this effect was made by the General of the Society of Jesus, Pedro Arrupe. In a major address to the Second Vatican Council, he identified the psychological pressures of the media with brutal clarity.

This new godless society operates in an extremely efficient manner, at least in its higher levels of leadership. It makes use of every possible means at its disposal, be they scientific, technical, social or economic. It follows a perfectly mapped out strategy. It holds almost complete sway in international organizations, in financial circles, in the field of mass communications: press, cinema, radio and television.

It is like the City of Man of Augustine. And it not only carries on the struggle against the City of God from outside the wall, but even crosses the ramparts and enters the very territory, of the City of God, insidiously influencing the minds of believer (including even religious and priests) with its hidden poison producing its inevitable fruits in the Church: naturalism, distrust and rebellion.

Arrupe paid dearly for his outspokenness, The press and networks of the Western world reacted to the exposure of their collective secularization of modern man away from the Christian faith. Yet as the speaker later publicly stated: it was Pope Paul VI who had personally recommended that an exposure be made of the uneven conflict between the secularizing media and the still-believing Christian people.

Those who have followed the phenomenal rise and growth of communism in Europe and Asia agree it was mainly the media which the followers of Karl Marx used to enslave hundreds of millions to their utopian Messianism.

Why Evangelization Through the Media

As we read God's providence in our day, we ask ourselves, how the Church's evangelization is being affected by the modern media. Not to know this is not to realize that the media are part of God's universal – with stress on the universal – plan of salvation.

No doubt religious instruction on a one-to-one basis remains as necessary as ever before. Christ's personal communication of His message of salvation remains as normative as it was at the dawn of Christianity. But something new has risen with the dawn of the twentieth century. The Church now has at her disposal the power to Christianize not only individuals but whole societies. She now has the means of not only instructing individual minds in the truths revealed by the Savior. She can now help to shape and enlighten the minds of whole cultures and motivate the wills of entire continents according to the mind and will of Jesus Christ.

What is the first effect of the media on evangelization? The media collectivize those who come under its influence. We now use terms like "tribalization" and "mass participation" vaguely to describe something of what is going on. Simultaneously thousands, or even millions of persons find themselves involved in seeing; hearing and feeling the influence of a single man or woman with whom they establish instant rapport. It is the Sermon on the Mount reenacted in our day, presuming that the one who is being watched or heard is himself in rapport with Jesus Christ. After all, Christ did not speak to multitudes by mere coincidence. No, He chose to address a multitude in order to join the people with Himself – as a multitude – and unite all who heard and saw Him in a communion of mind and heart.

All the while, the persons who are simultaneously hearing and seeing a personage on this media sense a kinship among themselves for which no previous form of communication could provide. There is a sense of communion with others and a kinship of spirit which no previous means of communication could confer. Our Lord alluded to this phenomenon when He said, "Where two or three are gathered together in my name, there I am in the midst of them."

What makes this collective experience so revolutionary on the one hand, and so marvelously promising for sharing the true faith on the other, is that it comes on the heels of a half millennium of isolated literacy. Modern man has been suddenly plunged into a deep participation with others. From a cold print culture that had been worshipping books, people are now exposed to other people with all the terrifying, and for us Christians ecstatic, possibilities of such exposure. Visual contact with lifeless print is now extended to warm intimacy with living persons where the whole person, body and soul and spirit, thought and emotion, becomes so profoundly affected and deeply influential in communicating the Gospel as to stagger the imagination.

Two hundred million joined with Pope Paul VI when he addressed the United Nations and some five hundred million have shared in the Mass and homily of John Pope John Paul II.

What needs to be stressed and reemphasized is that the new media have given us access to evangelization and catechesis that the modern world so desperately needs. There is now talk about the new age that will reunite a dismembered world. And powerful forces alien to Christ are mobilizing in this one world movement.

We must capitalize on this obvious need to unify a dismembered humanity. There is only one effective means of doing this – through propagating the Gospel of the Savior.

Not coincidentally the twentieth century has been the most homicidal in human history, There have been more death casualties in wars fought since 1900 than in all the previous centuries of human history put together. There are more legal murders of unborn children in one year than in all previous millennia in the annals of man.

Yes, with resounding emphasis, we need to unify a dismembered humanity. But the unification must be founded on the truth, which God became man to reveal to the human race. We who unworthily possess this fullness of truth, have at our service this divinely ordained means of proclaiming this truth on a scale, with an influence and with such global consequences, as our Christian evangelizers in the past never had access to.

How to Evangelize Through the Media

Only the Lord knows why the document on social communication has been the most neglected of the sixteen documents of the Second Vatican Council. One reason may be that this document is so outspoken in its insistence on the role of the media in the Church's apostolate of evangelization and catechesis. After a short introduction, *Inter Mirifica* sets down its thesis: "The Catholic Church was founded by Christ our Lord to bring salvation to all men. She feels obligated, therefore, to preach the Gospel. In the same way, she believes that her task involves employing the means of social communication to announce the good news of salvation and to teach men how to use them properly." Then follow some hard conclusions.

- The Church has a right to use these media which she considers necessary or even useful for the formation of Christians and for pastoral activity.
- The Church has a right to own these media.
- Bishops and priests have the duty to instruct and direct the faithful on how to use these media.
- The media are to be used for the salvation and perfection of both believing Christians and of all mankind.
- The laity has the principal responsibility to animate the media with a Christian and human spirit.

It is again the laity who are mainly to ensure that the media live up to God's providential purpose and the legitimate hopes of humanity.

While spelling out this divine purpose, it is assumed that believing Catholics will do everything they can to train themselves in the use of the media to exploit the apostolic opportunities that Christ now provides for His followers.

Each of the directives of the Second Vatican Council on how the media are to be used for proclaiming the faith carries with it what I do not consider an exaggeration: Catholics have to wake up to their grave responsibility in the modern world; they must be aroused from their sleep of lethargy in allowing the media to be mainly untapped for the extension of Christ's Kingdom in our day.

Right to the Media. This duty of the Church's leaders is a serious duty. It is easier to talk about this than to do something. What are we saying? We are saying that Christ's commandment to "preach the Gospel to all nations," teaching them to "observe all that I have commanded you," applies with thunderous implications to the media.

The Church founded by Christ has this duty, binding under pain of sin, to exploit the modern media of communication. Contrast this with the practical absence of Catholic evangelization by the media in most countries, and we begin to see the monumental task that lies ahead.

Right to Ownership. It is no trivial observation to add that the Church has also the “right to own these media.” How well the secularists understand the power that lies behind the ownership of the media. Ownership gives financial and political control that shapes the minds of whole continents. It is here especially that the Church depends on the laity to ensure that the media live up to God’s providential purpose and the hopes of humanity.

Role of Bishops and Priests. No doubt the laity have the duty to animate the media with the spirit of the Gospel. But members of the hierarchy and clergy have the parallel obligation “to instruct and direct the faithful on how to use these media.” At the heart of this obligation is the fact of contemporary history. Christ has given the Church the media precisely to evangelize the world. And within the Church those who received holy orders have the sacramental responsibility to carry on Christ’s mission as Teacher of the human race.

Pope Paul VI spelled this out in the clearest language. He was writing after the close of the general synod of bishops devoted to the question of evangelization.

“In our age which is characterized by the mass media we must not fail ... to avail of the media for the first proclamation of the message, for catechetical instruction and for a deeper study of the faith.”

These, when they are employed in the service of the Gospel, can disseminate the word of God over a vast area and carry the message of salvation to millions of men. The Church would feel herself guilty before God if she did not avail herself of those powerful instruments which human skill is constantly developing and perfecting. With their aid she may preach ‘upon the housetops’ the message which has been entrusted to her. In them she finds a new and more effective form – a platform or pulpit from which she can address the multitudes” (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45).

Pope John Paul II put these directives into apostolic practice on a scale never before experienced in papal history.

Universal Scope of the Media. The media are, of course, to be used for the salvation *and* sanctification of believing Christians, But not only for professed followers of Christ. They are intended in God’s providence to instruct and inspire “all mankind.”

Never before have such opportunities existed for literally fulfilling the Master’s commission to preach the Gospel to the whole human race. On Pentecost Sunday, people from all over the Mediterranean world miraculously received, the first public proclamation of the Gospel by the apostle Peter. Two millennia later, the Pentecostal phenomenon is now available on a universal scale beyond the wildest dreams of Peter’s successors until our day.

The Media as Channels of Grace

The historic opportunity we now have of witnessing to Christ across the continents must be inspired by the holiness of the communicators. Their power to evangelize the multitude depends on their own union with God. They shall be as effective in bringing souls to Christ as they are themselves united with Christian faith and humility, and the practice of chastity.

This is more than the obvious giving of good example. It is nothing less than a law of supernatural generation. Holiness is reproductive. Holy people reproduce themselves in the souls of those with whom they communicate.

What a glorious prospect lies ahead for Christianizing the world as we approach the twenty-first century! It all depends on how courageously those who evangelize through the media are themselves communicators of divine grace by their lives of heroic loyalty to Jesus Christ.