

**Statement
on the
COMMUNICATIONS
MEDIA
AND
CATECHESIS**

**Presented by the Delegates
of the
National Conference of
Catholic Bishops
of the United States
at the
1977 Synod of Bishops
Vatican City**

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From the very beginning, the Church has used the arts to communicate Christ's message and fix it in people's minds and hearts. Biblical stories, saints' lives, and religious themes of all sorts have been depicted in stained glass, mosaics, painting, and sculpture. Music, poetry, dance, drama, architecture, and other art forms have also served catechetical purposes. Contemporary media such as television, films, photography, filmstrips, slides, and tapes do so today. They are means with which the Church, like the farmer in the parable, broadcasts the seed in all directions (cf. Mk 4, 3 ff). Thus is the gospel "proclaimed from the housetops" (cf. Mt. 10, 27). The collaboration of catechesis and the arts and media, therefore, deserves close attention and encouragement.

**Impact of communications media
in catechesis**

The communications revolution has had a profound impact on our world, with implications as great for religion as for any other area of life. Contemporary media offer marvelous new opportunities for catechesis, but

also present serious challenges and problems. They can unite people, foster the sharing of ideas, promote mutual help, justice, and peace, and carry the gospel to those who otherwise might never hear it.

There are at least three different ways of thinking of the communications media in relation to catechesis: as shaper of the environment in which it takes place; as useful catechetical tools; and as appropriate subject matter. Not all catechists can or need to be media specialists, but all should have some understanding of the implications of media for their work. Communications media are relevant to every level of catechesis; they are pertinent to human development, to growth in theological understanding, and to faith experience itself.

Although media are instruments for transmitting messages, they also possess inherent capabilities and potentialities.¹ Every medium has its own integrity and special genius requiring specific skills of interpretation on the part of both communicators and audiences. There is an intrinsic connection between medium and message, between the "how" and "what" of communication. In using and evaluating media, catechists should be aware that a concept concretized in a medium is no longer simply an abstract idea, but an event. Communication is not just the delivering of messages, but an experience of sharing among human beings.

Radio and Television

Communications

The impact of the communications revolution, especially television, is very powerful in many countries. The influx of information

¹ Cf. *Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communications*. Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, January 29, 1971, 14; *On Evangelization* (Paul VI, 1975), 45.

from all forms of media is overwhelming. A person living in the United States today is said to be exposed to more information in a week than his or her counterpart of two centuries ago was in a year.

Many persons find that they are given more information than they can assimilate or evaluate. People need to acquire “literacy” in relation to the new media, that is, to grow in their ability to evaluate television and other contemporary media by critical standards which include gospel values.

Particular attention should be paid to the damage which can be done to children and adults by excessive exposure to television violence and especially to all forms of immorality in the mass media.

Furthermore, how children understand reality still depends largely on their relationships with other people. But “other people” now include a much larger community than the immediate family, notably the community to which children are exposed through media, particularly television which occupies so much of most children’s time. TV is important not only for the behavior it may encourage but that which it prevents—for instance, conversations, games, family celebrations, and other activities which foster learning and character development.

Instruments of catechesis

Broadcast media present special opportunities and challenges to the creativity of catechists. Radio and television can be direct instruments of catechesis. Catechists who plan to use them for this purpose should either acquire specialized media training or collaborate with others experienced in broadcast production. It may be appropriate for them to seek positions as consultants or advisors to producers of programs dealing

with religious matters within their competence.

Accountability of broadcast media

The broadcast media should be encouraged and supported when they promote human values, and called to task when they air unworthy and degrading presentations. This points to the need to make people familiar with the criteria and procedures which local television and radio stations are required to observe in order to obtain and keep their operating licenses. Individuals should be made aware of their right and duty to state their views to broadcasters.

Audience

Knowledge of the audience is as important to successful broadcast production as familiarity with media technology. Producers must understand people's attitudes and values. Religious and catechetical programming should be professionally excellent, and responsive to the interest and needs of viewers and listeners.

Broadcast media can be particularly helpful in meeting special catechetical needs and problems. They can, for instance, be the most effective means of communicating with people in isolated and rural areas, as well as with such groups as the aged and shut-ins. Radio and television also offer opportunities for ecumenical collaboration and so, potentially, for reaching larger audiences. More pooling of local, diocesan, and national talent and funds is essential to upgrade the amount and quality of religious and catechetical programming.

On-going technological developments

People concerned with the religious and catechetical potential of media should be alert to significant changes in technology, or-

ganizational structure, and policy now occurring or anticipated in the broadcasting industry.

Catholic press

Despite the emergence of electronic media, print media of many different kinds reach daily into virtually every home and place of work.

The Catholic press has long been central to the Church's communication effort. It deserves the support of the Catholic people. The Catholic press is the least expensive way of regularly bringing comprehensive religious news and instructional features to a large number of Catholics. It helps foster the sense of Christian community in its readers. It serves as a forum for the members of this community, providing opportunities for discussion and the exchange of ideas.

Catholic newspapers, magazines, books, pamphlets, and parish bulletins can be useful catechetical tools, especially in adult programs. Editors and publishers should provide appealing publications which help contemporary Catholics evaluate their experience in the light of Christian values, foster their growth in faith, and promote community among them. In particular, they should pay close attention to the requirements of justice and charity in reporting the news. Minority cultural, racial, and ethnic groups should have access to and make use of Catholic publications which are in their languages and reflect their special cultural values and concerns.

There is need for continuing dialogue and cooperation between catechetical leaders and the editors and publishers of Catholic publications at the diocesan and national levels. The aim should be to develop ways of exchanging ideas and information about catechetical needs and about the effective

use of the Catholic press for catechetical purposes. Catechists and catechetical offices at all levels should provide the Catholic press with news releases and photographs reflecting newsworthy aspects of catechists—trends, programs, meetings, personalities. They should also offer suggestions for interpretive features and columns of a catechetical nature, and be prepared to supply these when asked. As opportunities arise, they should collaborate with the Catholic press as planners, consultants, and writers.

Secular press

The secular press also offers opportunities to catechists, although it would generally be unrealistic to consider it a vehicle for direct catechesis.

Through a diocesan (or other) communications office or directly, catechists should provide secular publications with accurate and interesting information on catechetical matters. Typically, this is done by news releases. Catechists should be prepared to respond to press inquiries and to spend time when necessary discussing questions and issues with journalists. Secular publications are generally willing to entertain suggestions for articles and features on catechetical topics, provided these are of general interest. Opportunities exist in relation to publications ranging from community-oriented newspapers to national publications. In their approaches to the secular press on the latter levels in particular, catechists are advised to work with diocesan or national communications offices.

Training media producers

All who use the communications media in their work "have a duty in conscience to make themselves competent in the art of social

communication”;² and this applies in particular to people with educational responsibilities, including catechists. Theory, technique, and research should be part of media training. In line with what has been said above, catechists should learn how to take media into account as a crucial part of the cultural background and experience of those being catechized; how to use media in catechesis; and how to help their students understand and evaluate media in the light of religious values. They should also learn the proper use of advertising, which is such an influential means of communications today.

Training media users

Catechetical instruction concerning media should help people become knowledgeable viewers, listeners, and readers. Such training is necessary for them “to benefit to the full from what the instruments of social communications have to offer.”³ It is also required if they are to seek to improve the quality of media, either by advocacy directed at professional communicators, or by pursuing careers in media.

Because television occupies so much of the time of so many people, catechesis should seek to foster critical understanding of this medium in particular. Viewers need to know, for example, how programs are planned and produced; techniques used by advertisers and others to influence and persuade; whether and to what degree TV gives a true picture of life or distorts reality; and the role of profit motives in determining policy in commercial television. Communication techniques suited to print media (for example, the logical patterning of a typical news story) are inappropriate in the electronic media, which require other modes

² *Pastoral Instruction*, 15.

³ *Ibid.*, 65.

suited to themselves. Understanding the “language”—techniques, principles, symbols, etc.—is essential to both sender and receiver. Otherwise communication is impeded.

Because people grow in maturity and because there are frequent changes in the media, continuing education is necessary to keep the critical faculty well-honed. Finally, the Church is grateful to those in the media who produce and present programs of benefit to the spiritual development of humanity.



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