

Talk¹ given by **His Eminence Cardinal Georges Marie Martin Cottier, OP** at
the Round-Table Presentation of the LEV publication
John Paul II. The Development of a Theology of Communication
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First of all, I cordially greet everyone present. I asked myself why I was invited to present this beautiful book, since I am not a specialist. Today, not being a specialist doesn't necessarily mean one isn't competent. I would say that, as a Christian and as a Theologian, I reflected on the topic. At least I have the conviction, in common sense, of the importance of the media. And so it seems to me that this is sufficient for me to share with you some thoughts that I have on the Theology of Communication.

This is a new expression, and, as the book shows, it is perhaps 20 or 30 years that this theme has appeared in the literature. Now, it has taken wings and this book is certainly an important contribution for the understanding of the Theology of Communication.

I would say that, speaking of communication, we need to first of all speak of the content, what is being transmitted. Yet, we do need to be concerned about the means used to transmit the content, since the media is not always innocent. It is true they offer rich possibilities which were previously unknown. As this book well expresses, if we wish to go back to the source, Christianity is based on communication in the sense that the first communicator is the Word Incarnate, Christ. He communicated, that is revealed (in this sense communication and revelation can be identified with one another), to us the mystery of the Father, the mystery of God, and his plan for our salvation. We are starting very high, here, and there is the risk that beginning at this elevated point, we fail to reach the goal. Yet, I think that beginning in this way, we can share several important reflections.

I would like to cite the last verses of the Prologue in St. John's Gospel: "No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, ever at the Father's side, who has revealed him." (Jn1:18). The first communicator, who revealed to us the mystery of God, is the Son. It is for this reason that communication is part of the Christian message. Not only this, but the communication offered by Christ has been

¹ This talk has been translated and transcribed from the audio-cassette taped by Vatican Radio during the Round-table presentation on February 4, 2009 in the Sala Marconi at Vatican Radio headquarters in Rome, Italy. The author, Cardinal Cottier, has not revised this manuscript.

transmitted to us. We can quickly see that, speaking of communication in Christ – the Word Incarnate because He communicates to us the mystery of God by means of His humanity – there is the presence of mediation, of a Mediator.

This concept of mediation is very important because we could speak directly of Christ, but it seems to me that the most interesting problem for this Theology is to question ourselves on those who were the first ones, after Christ, to transmit the Good News, the Apostles. They were the testimonies, and on this theme I would like to spend some time. The Gospels, I was looking at Luke, but all the Gospels insist on the fact that those who testify do so, are not alone, but dependent on the highest witness, the Holy Spirit.

Since we are in the year of St. Paul, we can learn much from him on this theme. We do not have much time, but I would like to point out two of St. Paul's attitudes which are a bit contradictory: one which we find when he is in Athens and the other when he is in Corinth. I will read a few verses from the Letter to the Corinthians which seems to be a warning with regard to the mass media. In the second chapter, which treats the same theme as that touched on at the end of the first chapter, we read: "As for myself, brothers, when I came to you I did not come proclaiming God's testimony with any particular eloquence or "wisdom". No, I determined that while I was with you I would speak of nothing but Jesus Christ and him crucified. When I came among you it was in weakness and in fear, and with much trepidation. My message and my preaching had none of the persuasive force of "wise" argumentation, but the convincing power of the Spirit. As a consequence, your faith rests not on the wisdom of men but on the power of God" (1Cor2:1-5). The rest of the chapter goes on to comment on this. Here we find ourselves faced with a paradox: if we ask ourselves what is Christian preaching, we see Paul has a certain diffidence towards the communication media of his time. These weren't technological means, but they were quite an elaborate means for the Greek culture: rhetoric, along with a deterioration of rhetoric called sophisms. It seems that this is lost in today's culture, but it was very important in the classic Greek and Latin culture, which gave great value to being able to speak well, to the beauty of discourse, to rhetoric as the art of persuasion. In this sense, it seems to me we are faced with the issue of mass media, which today is no longer that of this type of rhetoric, but a new rhetoric, a new way of speaking which is very much conditioned by instruments which, the book shows very well, are not only

interested in content, but in its creation, modification, and sometimes even falsification. Thus, the evangelical use of these communications media presupposes a profound knowledge of what they are in themselves. It seems to me that it was Marshall McLuhan who said that the media is not only the means, but the message itself. This is a paradox, yet there is something true in this statement, so we must keep it in mind. The television especially illustrates what we found in St. Paul, that we cannot separate the word spoken from the speaker. Televised discourse is not purely speaking because it includes the commitment of presence by the one who is speaking. This has been well studied since television touches emotions and time; its way of treating time is peculiar to the media which doesn't respect the usual duration of time, presenting things very rapidly and in many things in quick succession, creating a sense of time peculiar to these means of communication. These are just some problems which would require greater reflection.

I now return to Theology. What are the problems that I see? The book speaks of several, one of which I think is quite important: ethics in the mass media. The use of these means is not indifferent – and this I say not just in the negative sense, but in the positive sense as well. We need a better developed deontology for the use of these media, not only in the Church, but on the cultural level as well. I have, several times, accepted to give interviews to journalists. Generally, the journalist was honest, reporting what I had said, but I soon learned that the title of the interview didn't belong to the journalist, but to the director. And often, in the title, they make you say things that are directly opposite to what the article reports. What do the readers do? They read the titles and this is not honest. Thus, we need a profound ethical reflection on the service of truth in the media.

The second point, which is more delicate, is how we can guarantee an evangelical style of the preaching and witnessing through mass media. Certainly, a technical formation is needed; yet, I'm not sure that this always permits the transmission of the Word which is also witnessing. It often happens that we hear people who are saying things that are really correct, but they say them so badly, that it is counter-productive. This happens when they do not know what to do with the equipment we have now. This second point is delicate because I only cited St. Paul's experience at Corinth where he certainly had to work very hard there, and seems to have left behind what he did in Athens. In Athens he delivered a well

elaborated discourse in the Areopagus. In it he respected all of the technical rules of the time which included dialectics and rhetoric of which I have already spoken.

We can conclude that in Christianity, we need both of these points. Just think of sacred art: the Church did not live poverty as impoverishment. Think of the art that was born of St. Francis of Assisi – a great font for medieval art – quite paradoxical, yet true. In Christian logic, then, we keep these two points every present in our reflection and praxis. We keep this as part of the work of the Theology of Communication.

I have left until now an important aspect of the book, its origin – the figure of Pope John Paul II. It seems to me I can make two observations about this great Pontiff. He didn't really give us a Theology of Communication in itself, although his magisterium is full of theology. As Pope, as the successor of St. Peter, we owe him many points and many insights towards a Theology of Communication. He gave us the basis for this Theology, insisting on its importance. Besides his teaching, there is also the importance of his personality – he was a great communicator! It was almost second nature for him – we know he wanted to be an actor in theatre. He knew how to wisely use the media, give us a good lesson.

I would like to conclude with an observation: he had many visitors. When he was already very sick, there were some who suggested that he should give in his resignation (they said this in view of our modern notion of efficiency). What struck me here is that perhaps the greatest evangelical testimony he gave was precisely when he was sick, in his last years when we saw this man disarmed, without defenses, authentic. He let us see those aspects of our humanity that are often totally hidden from us by the mass media: the suffering of sickness, old age, etc. This was perhaps the time that he awed us more than others. I was impressed by the fact that those who suggested his resignation had a certain age, but this suggestion never came from the young who understood him quite profoundly. Here too, we have a lesson – in the mass media there is an important intuitive aspect that the young capture.

These have been a few reflections that came to me as I read this book. I would like to thank the authors of this beautiful book, which we hope will be useful to many.