

## **Catholic Social Teaching on Media**

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The history of relationship between the Church and media has witnessed three eras, namely, folk media era, mass media era and new media era. Folk media, referring to traditional means of exchanging information based on sound, image, sign and language, were prominent till 15<sup>th</sup> century. Later, with the invention and popularity of printing press, mass media consisting of print media, television, cinema, radio and advertisements ruled the information industry till 20<sup>th</sup> century. Though the history of new media describing internet based digital technology began after the Second World War, it started dominating the world of communication for the past two decades. From its beginning, the Church has always used various means to communicate the Gospel to the humanity. From ancient times the Church has been in interface with media, because all media have to do with communication in a symbiotic relation. Media presents not only how the head of Church functions in public, but also its perspective of the Church to the mass. Today in the media era, what a common person perceives about the Church depends on the portrayal of media. In this context, this article attempts to present some key points concerning the relationship between media and the Church and the social teachings of the Church about media.

## Vatican Councils and Media

Examining the relationship between the Catholic Church and the press, Russell Shaw observes as follows: “The Catholic Church’s first face-to-face encounter with media in something like their modern form occurred at the First Vatican Council of 1869-70. Vatican I was the council that defined the doctrine of papal infallibility as a dogma of faith. Media interest naturally was high, and an international press corps gathered in Rome to cover the event. But covering the council, journalists found, was easier said than done. Strict secrecy was the order of the day at the Vatican. Historian Owen Chadwick says the people in charge took the view that ‘as all proceedings were confidential, no one ought to be told anything’.”<sup>1</sup> Every change in media and the system of communication did have an impact on the Church. Till the middle of nineteenth century, the perspective of the Church on media was traditional and it had a deep suspicion about any modern development and placed itself in a defensive position against media impacts.

The turning point in the history was set with the Decree on the Means of Social Communication (*Inter Mirifica*), issued on December 4, 1963 promulgated by the Second Vatican Council.<sup>2</sup> “Therefore, in society men have a right to information, in accord with the circumstances in each case, about matters concerning individuals or the community” is a significant statement in the document affirming that every human person in society has a ‘right to information.’ Thus, the Council declares a substantive natural right of human being in relation to communication. It was a remarkable breakthrough in the interpretation of the Church on communication and human rights. We should note that there was a stiff resistance behind the promulgation of this document. The fact is that “not all of the Council Fathers were so interested in social communications, nor did they fully understand it. This led to *Inter Mirifica* being one of the most difficult conciliar documents to be approved: 164 voted against it, the largest number of non placet (against) votes of the entire Council.”<sup>3</sup>

The momentous contribution and effort of *Inter Mirifica* were to give more categorical attention to the prominence of communication. It encourages people to use media for evangelization and alerts them to be aware of what is going on in the world of media. *Inter Mirifica* has just two chapters. The first emphasizes on moral obligation in the use of media. The second stresses the use of media to enhance and expand the apostolate. In other words, the discussion over the media in the Church is centred on two aspects: the way in which they can be used for our goals, for evangelization; and on an ethical level, that is to say, the way in which the world of mass media should act. As implied in *Inter Mirifica*, the underlying principle in the relationship between media and the Church lies in the perspective of the latter that media are “instruments” and not “agents.”

The perspective and emphasis of the Church on media seem to be insufficient. When we analyse the current dynamics of media, we can observe that it acts an agent of socialization. It tends to influence our socio-political view, our decision making in a consumerist world, our taste in popular culture and our belief system. This is true to a great extent in the digital media era, as people, including children and youth, are spending more time on mobile phones or tablets than with family members. The messages and values that come from media are very powerful to be ignored. Children and youth imitate their media generated role models in their life style and they have become potential consumers directly or indirectly.

As far as the Church is concerned, She has focused mostly on the content of media, not in the dynamics of media itself. That is why the Council affirms that the principles of the moral order with a note of following two points: first, “the subject-matter, or content, which each medium communicates in its own way”; and second, “the circumstances in which the content is communicated.”

What the council envisioned about media is hardly experienced in today's media world, including Catholic media. There is a wide gap between the ethical principles recommended by the *Decree on the Means of Social Communication and the practice of media in reality*. Its emphasis on the responsibility related to moral content lies primarily on the side of media persons, not the mass. It may be applicable to non-interactive mass media, but not relevant to the social media where media structure has been democratized and people are used to participatory communication. Since the promulgation *Inter Mirifica* 50 years ago, the scenario has changed in the world of social media. However, as media has rapidly advanced, the concerns of the council have been further developed in other Vatican writings over the last five decades.

### **Myths about Media**

In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Second Vatican Council itself was a media event. The communication system played a vital role during this historical episode. Some maintain that media played rather a negative role, because some media firms interpreted and projected the council based on their anti-Catholic biases, from which several myths were created on the relationship between media and the Church. We are yet to analyse if the Church has fully recovered from such myths or stereotyped understanding of media.

For this reason, James Martin SJ makes an observation on the attitude of the Catholics, in general, about Media and highlights three myths about the mainstream media and the Catholic Church.<sup>4</sup>

1. The media is anti-Catholic.
2. The media deliberately misrepresents the Church.
3. The media does not care about the Church.

**Let us try to analyse these myths.**

- 1) These myths are created or generalized due to one's inability to distinguish between deliberate attacks on the church and critiques of it. Historically there are incidents to show that the Church deserved criticism and benefited by it.
- 2) These myths are popularized in the recent times when media reports on sexual abuse crisis. For instance, the Church in America underwent prolonged, excessive and probing journalistic scrutiny in the recent decades.
- 3) By and large, the Catholics are more comfortable with their own religious media than non-Catholic or secular media.
- 4) Sometimes the media makes mistakes about the church. But most mistakes are ascribable to ignorance rather than to attempts to misrepresent the Church. When religion reporters of mainstream media cover Catholic news, we cannot expect them to master and present theological or spiritual implications of some nomenclatures.
- 5) There is a problem in countries like India where the Christians are minorities and the ideology of Hindutva religious fundamentalism hijacks media.
- 6) It is true that media pays attention to the Church when there is "new value". Further, since people, in general, take adversarial stand against any established institution including the Church and the related individuals, media tends to "serve" their interest.

**Dawn of New Media**

These analyses signify that there is a challenge before the Church to transcend these myths, face the realities and dialogue with media, an essential

fabric of the human society today. At the same time, the relationship and dynamics between the Church and media considerably changed in the new millennium due to democratic nature of social media, contrary to the hierarchical nature of mass media. Social media strikes on the conventional top-down model of preaching Christianity and the hierarchical communication system which sustained a passive form where the congregation was mostly at the receiving end. It demands to take Church activities back out into the online world and change the relationship of the Church leaders with their members. It provides space for congregation to raise questions concerning spiritual or theological matters and share daily liturgical readings, homilies, photos, Church news, etc. Thus conventional Sunday gathering is extended to virtual gathering every day and there is an opportunity in social media 24×7 engagement. As Rev Pam Smith, author of *Online Mission and Ministry* puts it, “There is no limit other than our imaginations in how we might use these new communication opportunities to reach people.”<sup>5</sup>

When the exponential growth of new media proactively demands the response of the Church, She cannot be a silent or passive spectator. In addition, digital technology cannot be treated as an alternative communication space any more, as it operates as the key platform for exchange of information. Responding to this need, several good things happened in the Church hierarchy in the past one decade. Pope Benedict XVI is the first Pope to join Twitter. This move was widely lauded as a significant step moving towards modernity which allows more access to the Pope who is ever available. More than any document or encyclical letter, his virtual presence, connecting with people and democratic participation in communication gave a powerful social teaching to the humanity, particularly to the Catholic world. A press report claims, “Before Monday’s launch and the unveiling of the @pontifex Twitter handle, the pope had just 11 followers -mostly cardinals and those on his social-communications team. By the time

the press conference ended less than an hour later, he had topped 14,000 followers, thanks only to journalists tweeting from the press conference. By the end of the day, he had already topped 100,000, and that was climbing quickly.”<sup>6</sup> This overwhelming response was not unexpected because Pope’s joining in twitter was a surprising event and a pleasant gesture to many. During this occasion Vatican said that the Pope’s presence on Twitter was a concrete expression of his conviction that the Church must be present in the digital arena.

Following the footsteps of his predecessor, Pope Francis joined Twitter first and Instagram later. When he joined Instagram, he quickly set the record of one million followers. A message of Pope Francis in Instagram dated March 19, 2016 says, “I am beginning a new journey, on Instagram, to walk with you along the path of mercy and the tenderness of God.” Social communication is an opportunity for the leaders of the Church to reach their people. In a Message for the 48th World Communications Day, Pope Francis says, “A culture of encounter demands that we be ready not only to give, but also to receive. Media can help us greatly in this, especially nowadays, when the networks of human communication have made unprecedented advances. The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.”<sup>7</sup> When we see internet as a gift from God, our attitude towards new media changes positively and demands our responsibility and duty in the use of media. It is an apparent sign that the view of the Church on media has changed drastically leading towards healthy interaction.

Following these developments, the Church has come out with various social teachings about media particularly in the context of mushrooming new media technologies. Let us see some concerns of the Church on new media.

## Digital Divide

“Digital divide” is a grave and challenging issue today. It is a term referring to the widening gap between demographics and countries in the degree of access to new media and modern communication technology. While the increased use of information technology by the affluent, the economically and socially marginalized people do experience exclusion. The gulf alienating the poor and marginalized from the new media technology is a sign of tragedy in the information era. That is why Pope Benedict XVI addressed this issue in his 43rd World Communications Day Message as follows: “These technologies are truly a gift to humanity and we must endeavour to ensure that the benefits they offer are put at the service of all human individuals and communities, especially those who are most disadvantaged and vulnerable”<sup>8</sup> Message Of The Holy Father Benedict Xvi For The 43rd World Communications Day,

However, increasing internet connections and cheap supply of mobile phone do not bridge the divide. In deeper level, the term digital divide implies the rate of digital literacy. As far as India is concerned, illiteracy rate is 25-30 per cent and digital illiteracy is even higher. About 70 per cent of over one billion Indians lives in rural areas, and only about 400 million have Internet access<sup>9</sup>. The so-called dream of digital India is no way closer to the reality.

## Personal Space

“Parents should remember that they have a most serious duty to guard carefully lest shows, publications and other things of this sort, which may be morally harmful, enter their homes or affect their children under other circumstances”<sup>10</sup> says *Inter Mirifica* in no.10. Probably the document may not have thought about the circumstances of new media, but it was prophetic in a way, that we already experienced media entering the house in the form

of television and desktop. Much more, media, surpassing the family space, has entered the personal space of each individual in the form of smart phones. Today's media world witnesses the erosion of boundaries between public and private space. On the one hand new media has reduced the distances and spaces, but on the other hand it is maintaining one's personal distance from others. New media permits people to have a space of their own in which others cannot access. Social gathering of public or family members or friends for a media experience is not a necessity any more. Gone are the days when people gathered to watch movies in theatres without any other alternative. Today watching movie in theatres is one of the alternatives, as new media provides other opportunities to watch movies in private space with the use of laptop or smart phones. The implication behind this change is that social control on the individuals in the use of media is under threat.

Therefore, the same paragraph (no.10) says, "Those who make use of the media of communications, especially the young, should take steps to accustom themselves to moderation and self-control in their regard. They should, moreover, endeavour to deepen their understanding of what they see, hear or read. They should discuss these matters with their teachers and experts, and learn to pass sound judgements on them."<sup>11</sup> The summary of this concern specifies the need for media education. This need was relevant during the era of mass media and it is also a compelling need today in new media era, when youth and children seem to be more comfortable in personal space than non-virtual social space in using media. It is imperative to note that mass media event took place in organized time and space. For instance, if one wants to watch a TV programme, he or she should sit in front the TV at a particular time and space. Now the internet based mobile phone has given the freedom to have the same experience at any time and any space. Comparatively we do experience more freedom to choose our content in media today. In this changing dynamics of time and space, media education

should inculcate the sense of freedom and responsibility and integrate personal space and social space creatively.

### **Constructed Realities**

Reality show is a television genre programming unscripted real life stories with both non-professional actors and celebrities. It tends to be dramatic with the focus on personal conflicts and leads to entertainment. For instance, 'Bigg Boss' is a Tamil reality TV show aired on Star Vijay hosted by popular Tamil film star Kamal Hassan. Right now, when this article is being written, this show is the target of social media discussion. Since there is nothing inherently wrong in the concept, the viewers flock to watch it and be part of it emotionally. At the same time, it's mostly a set up to draw the attention of the audience and their reaction and to compete with other channels in terms of Television Rating Point. The audience find them entertaining firstly, and become emotional secondly, get attached to some characters of the show thirdly, and they cannot withdraw themselves from the show at any cost.

As reality shows are popular all over the world, Pope Francis addressed in a youth conference that Television is full of 'reality shows' which are not real stories, but only moments passed before a television camera by characters living from day to day, without a greater plan. And he further adds, "Don't let yourselves be led astray by this false image of reality! Be the protagonists of your history; decide your own future."<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note that Pope Francis has extended his analysis on TV reality shows to social media reality images. He says, "In the social media, we see faces of young people appearing in any number of pictures recounting more or less real events, but we don't know how much of all this is really 'history', an experience that can be communicated and endowed with purpose and meaning."<sup>13</sup>

His concern is quite genuine, as some studies prove that watching these shows have a negative impact on youth like indulging in violence, false identifications, lying, cheating, abusing, ditching their own family and friends and affecting self-esteem. More than these, all other burning issues during the telecast of this show become side-lined. The pro-active nature of social media turns to be reactive responding to the show positively or negatively and the discussion on the show becomes inevitable. Therefore, saying no to such reality shows does not solve the issues. Basically any kind of “reality” in media is a misnomer as it is always a “constructed reality” according to a theory of media education. This theory is applicable not only to reality shows, but also any media content. Awareness about “constructed realities”, reinterpretation of media genres and motivation to be protagonist of our history could help youth formation.

### **Encountering Bad News**

The old saying goes that ‘bad news sells’ and it has a ‘news value’ in new media, particularly social media. There is nothing wrong in informing people about disasters, crime, corruption, scandal and terrorism, but keeping the people always in the realm of bad news results in serious consequences. For instance, continual bombardment of bad news may cause depression focusing dark future. Several studies confirm that bad news spreads faster than other types of messages and sparks negative sentiments. News media’s obsession with bad news adds fuel to the fire of restlessness, anxiety and fear. The existence or creation of bad news is not something new to the world. The problem lies how we respond to the instant access to such news in new media. We spend more time on discussing it, suffer from anxiety, forward it to our group members and spread the negative sentiments. In such occasion ‘good news’ has no time and space in our communication.

People are naturally stimulated to listen to bad news to check mainly what went wrong rather than what went right.

Communicating hope and trust, the message of Pope Francis on 51<sup>st</sup> World Communication day strikes at root of this issue. “I am convinced that we have to break the vicious circle of anxiety and stem the spiral of fear resulting from a constant focus on “bad news” (wars, terrorism, scandals and all sorts of human failure). This has nothing to do with spreading misinformation that would ignore the tragedy of human suffering, nor is it about a naive optimism blind to the scandal of evil. Rather, I propose that all of us work at overcoming that feeling of growing discontent and resignation that can at times generate apathy, fear or the idea that evil has no limits. Moreover, in a communications industry which thinks that good news does not sell, and where the tragedy of human suffering and the mystery of evil easily turn into entertainment, there is always the temptation that our consciences can be dulled or slip into pessimism. I would like, then, to contribute to the search for an open and creative style of communication that never seeks to glamourize evil but instead to concentrate on solutions and to inspire a positive and responsible approach on the part of its recipients. I ask everyone to offer the people of our time storylines that are at heart “good news”.”<sup>14</sup>

The critical reading of Pope Francis on bad news throws light on the dark side of the so-called “information era”. His approach can be applied even to the contexts of “hoax news”, “manufactured news”, “paid news” etc. The complexity of problems concerning “variety of news” could be understood in the competition of 247 news channels and the free publicity given by social media through forwarding tendency. Hence, it is an uphill task to deconstruct bad news, identify right news and preach good news.

## Conclusion

The relationship between media and Church has been crucial all along. Though the Church pro-actively uses media for evangelization and affirms the right to information, it addresses various ethical issues related to dynamics of media. Understanding that media is not just an instrument, but an agent for socialization, the leaders of the Church have set an example by making their presence felt in virtual space to fulfil the mandate of Christ 'to go into the all the world'. It is an ongoing challenge for the Church to fill the rift in the relationship with media and dialogue with media persons consistently. To empower the people in the digital divide, integrate personal and social space of media users, deconstruct constructed realities, and boldly preach Good News in the world polluted by bad news are nothing but an invitation to respond creatively.

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## End notes

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