



## “Communicating in Catholic Movements and in the world”

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First of all, a cordial greeting to all the conference attendees, gathered for this important event on the eve of the final session.

Due to the vastness of the topic, when one is invited to talk about communication, the difficult part concerns the beginning, the opening of the discussion since the indication of an outline is not always enough which, in this case, concerns the Catholic movements but also the world.

I think it is necessary to ask ourselves, in a preliminary way, if there exists, or can exist, a specific type of communication for movements. And to what extent, if it exists, can it differ from ordinary communication, i.e. adaptable to any circumstance.

Going into this preliminary distinction is a way to immediately find yourself faced with the changes, or rather I would say, the different nature of modern communication.

It is clear to everyone that today, even compared to a decade ago, the way of communicating has changed. The means through which the word (but not only: also gestures or different expressions) places itself at the center of our relationships have radically changed. More and more, in the digital age, words are accompanied by images; it is increasingly not subject to distances, and without this leading to delays or postponements on the state of the dialogue.

We can perhaps begin to say that ordinary communication represents only one expression, since in reality the great variety of means (in more updated terms multimedia) corresponds to a more extensive variety of communications. Each area has its own, which differs not only in the diversity of the means to be used, but naturally in the objectives and the audience to which it is addressed.

### **The importance and new role of media.**

At this point, I would like to focus on the different impact of more traditional means such as radio, television, the written press, cinema, compared to what we could define as the new "digitally rooted" communication. These are vehicles that continue to have a life of their own. The digital revolution hasn't sent them to the attic but it has certainly changed them profoundly.

What happened, in fact, was their particular proliferation: each of them, with the advent of digital, while retaining their own identity, nevertheless strengthened it by giving life to new tools, first of all, social media and now a very widespread family of applications that we normally use on our smartphones: the former Twitter, now X, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram and others of more limited impact.

Faced with this impressive evolution, today we talk about old and new communication. And the word that occurs most to mark this turning point is revolution.

It should also be noted that this is a revolution that is still underway, far from behind us, observing the continuous and astonishing progress that the digital world produces almost day by day.

## **Communication and the message**

It was the birth, some speak of the "invention", of the Internet that opened, or rather opened wide, the new ways of modern communication. The irruption of this world aroused, at first, wonder and bewilderment.

Everything changes. And the concern for the message soon came to the fore, that is, the fidelity of the message in comparison with the completely new scenarios of a communication that placed itself at the head of the social and cultural changes underway in every part of the world.

The "old" communication limited itself to describing, telling, showing - through audiovisual media, once limited to the small and large screen - reality and ways of life. We were used to a subsidiary function. We knew how to distinguish the means from the message and not even the intuitions of a great scholar like McLuhan had taken us beyond the established boundaries.

Faced with what happened afterwards, we certainly cannot speak of simple innovation. New technologies have immediately assigned a completely different role to communication: no more subsidiarity but a form of conscious protagonism, devoid of scruples and prudence. The new communication, in reality, has taken center stage, has begun to dictate its laws, or rather to make new ones, to the point of actually guiding the processes of a world in transition. The most striking example concerns globalization, the event that has marked our time. Even today it is debated whether it was not determined precisely by the development of communication pushed beyond the thresholds of time and space; whether the world has not become a "village" precisely due to the impact and influence of a communication which, having freed itself, through new technologies, of its own borders, has gone on to undermine others on its own.

*Instant communication* suddenly became reality and, crossing traditional boundaries, opened up unthinkable paths in every field - social, cultural, economic - it crossed. Everything is communication, we have come to say to celebrate and emphasize its power.

### **The authority of the new communication.**

However, we can say that it took us time to fully and totally recognize this change of era. It was difficult for us to resign ourselves or not to bat an eyelid when faced with certain expressions of the new communication, made on purpose, it seemed to us, to test our acceptance. First of all, we struggled to accept the authority of the new means which seemed useful to us, yes, but limited to ordinary, colloquial, almost "service" forms of communication. Perhaps we would never have imagined that declarations and solemn acts of the highest bodies and the most authoritative personalities, including the Pope and heads of state, could be conveyed and disseminated via tweet and on various social media platforms. It resisted in some way, a form of natural hierarchy that perhaps signaled more a surrender than a true and convinced adherence to the reality of the new communication.

Attitudes and moods immediately swept away. Communication today is made up of these means and we must realize that it is not possible to stop the wind with our hands.

The tragic evolution of our times then consolidated the radical change of pace. Smartphones, more than the cameras themselves, brought the war in Ukraine home to us, and continue to tell us about the dramatic days of the bloody siege in Gaza after the ferocious attack by Hamas on Israel. But even more so in wars, social media and the tools of new communication are not just witnesses, they don't just record events. They are themselves protagonists, as they were at the time of the pandemic, the other scourge of these difficult and tormented days of ours. By isolating us physically, the pandemic has offered the new media, the entire galaxy of digital communication, the opportunity on a silver platter to enter even more deeply into people's concrete lives. For a considerable time, the lockdown made social media our language, our expressions, the privileged and almost only means of our way of communicating. It has created small and large communities, certainly virtual, but potentially

capable of developing their relationships in person. How the pandemic has contributed to changing the way of communicating in the church is the subject of many studies. Some have gone so far as to say that streaming broadcasts, like Sunday celebrations themselves, have contributed to emptying the churches, also pointing out that the return to normality has actually marked a decline in the turnout of the faithful.

In any case, it is a topic that was able to gain ground precisely because new technologies technically allowed remote participation, but with all the modalities offered by communication that has never been so broad and articulated.

## **Communication and the Church**

This last aspect directly introduces an inevitable question at this point. What is, and what has been, the attitude of the church towards this real media revolution?

For a movement like yours which places the educational factor linked to the commitment to Catholic witness at the centre, it is a question that cannot be evaded.

An essential premise: it cannot be said that the church has blocked the way to new communication. It immediately realized the importance of the change, despite perhaps not having the means to implement it immediately.

I think it might be useful to refer to what happened in Vatican communication to seek a more motivated response. The communication of the Holy See has just faced a reform - within the more general reform of the entire Roman curia - which has totally changed its character. I take the Vatican communication as a reference because it represents, in some way, the paradigm of what occurred on a more general level.

The old means of communication of the Holy See, largely developed from the Council onwards - before there existed L'Osservatore romano and Vatican Radio - with the subsequent addition of the Press Office, and the Vatican Television Center (all under the umbrella of Pontifical Council for Social Communications), have practically merged into a single integrated system which groups them all together in digital form. From individual media, each with its own life, to a multimedia galaxy that speaks all the different languages of old and new communication.

It was a necessary step, according to the characteristics of the new multifunctional tools which, at the same time, they make it possible to transmit the word associated with images and spread not only through traditional means, but segmented through the various social media sources that feed the very crowded audiovisual "bank". Practically for all old communication the bell of a profound reconversion in the digital world has rung.

We talk about revolution because a new world has opened up. Even in the church, if we consider that the first protagonists of this history that comes from afar, we must consider the popes of modernity, starting from Paul VI with whom the question of communication, which entered into a resigned tone in the first phase of the Council, took then flight in the following decade, to the point of presenting itself as a natural letter motif in the long years of the pontificate of John Paul II. The push became so strong that, almost unexpectedly, communication became one of the great themes of Pope Benedict's teaching. That's right: a pope who continued to write, until the end, by hand, with a pencil, ended up marking a turning point in the transition from one era of ecclesial communication to another. This is why Benedetto's communication, with the return, in a certain sense, to the primacy of the word in the (full) age of the Internet, represents a separate chapter in the communication story. In fact, Benedict officially started, with a click from a tablet, the first portal, news.va which showed the path of digital conversion to all Vatican media. How can we not consider, even just by title, the impact, or rather the weight, that communication ended up having in his pontificate?

Just think of the Vatileaks drama, but not only that. And, perhaps most sensational of all, from a communicative point of view, the "Distorted Lesson" of Regensburg, a magisterial essay mistaken as an act of hostility of the moment against the Muslim world.

Then he came, Francesco. And here we are dealing with ongoing history, and the one told in the first person by the Popes.

We can start from an apparent contradiction: it cannot be said, in absolute terms, that he is passionate about communication, but it is also certain that Francis did not have to wait to be elected Pope to recognize its importance. And it must be added that once on the throne of Peter he was able to realize that within the walls, few other problems required more immediate attention.

Francis is the third Pope of the new millennium, and the history of this first twenty-plus years, of the church and of the world, can be summarized precisely through the three popes of the third millennium. With Bergoglio's election to the papacy, the anniversary of the "first time" becomes almost unstoppable: for the first time an exponent of the South American church is on the chair of Peter; for the first time a Jesuit becomes Pope and for the first time the son of a family of emigrants is elected, in a season characterized by the phenomenon of great migrations. Even ecclesial communication is greedy, for its part, for firsts and the Pope "called from the other side of the world" immediately represents a great challenge.

The church as "a field hospital", the danger that it could make one shut up "in small things and small precepts" or transform itself into the "protective nest of our mediocrities", confessing oneself as a "sinner on whom God has looked", but above all the terms of a positive vision of a church which, in the light of "Gaudium et spes " "is always on a journey with its people", represented the important chapters of a communication never so expressive of a pontificate which has chosen to stand side by side in every moment to man.

Thus it fell to Francis, the first pope of the generation who did not take part directly in the Council - and also the first of the one who was called to begin its reception - to project Vatican communication towards a new time, indeed a true transition of era.

## **Conclusion**

To remain in the ecclesial context, an evaluation of the changes that have occurred in communication leads us to believe that the five centuries since Gutenberg's printing at the time of the Council are not worth, in terms of innovation and progress, the last sixty years culminating in digital era, and for a long time "told" by characters and lead matrices, on the paper of books or newspapers.

It is another world and another time for a communication that increasingly seeks to escape the role of "service", to establish itself - once it has become aware of its role - as an active - and sometimes decisive - protagonist in the events of a hyper-connected world. But also hyper-tormented.

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