



Pontifical Council for Social Communications

42th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

*The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service.
Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others*

May 4, 2008

Brief Questionnaire on Info-Ethics¹

1. How does the Church view the communications media?

“The Church's approach to the means of social communication is fundamentally positive, encouraging. She does not simply stand in judgment and condemn; rather, she considers these instruments to be not only products of human genius but also great gifts of God and true signs of the times. She desires to support those who are professionally involved in communication by setting out positive principles to assist them in their work, while fostering a dialogue in which all interested parties – today, that means nearly everyone – can participate” (EC, 4).

“Involvement in the mass media, however, is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the ‘new culture’ originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology” (John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 37).

2. What are ethics in social communications?

“The Second Vatican Council declared: ‘If the media are to be correctly employed, it is essential that all who use them know the principles of the moral order and apply them faithfully in this domain’ (*Inter Mirifica*, 4). The moral order to which this refers is the order of the law of human nature, binding upon all because it is ‘written on their hearts’ and embodies the imperatives of authentic

¹ **Abbreviations for the following documents of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications:**

AN (Aetatis Novae)

EC (Ethics in Communications)

EA (Ethics in Advertising)

EI (Ethics in Internet)

CI (The Church and Internet)

WCD (World Communications Day)

human fulfillment.

For Christians, moreover, the law of human nature has a deeper dimension, a richer meaning. 'Christ is the 'Beginning' who, having taken on human nature, definitively illumines it in its constitutive elements and in its dynamism of charity towards God and neighbor.' Here we comprehend the deepest significance of human freedom: that it makes possible an authentic moral response, in light of Jesus Christ, to the call 'to form our conscience, to make it the object of a continuous conversion to what is true and to what is good.'

In this context, the media of social communications have two options, and only two. Either they help human persons to grow in their understanding and practice of what is true and good, or they are destructive forces in conflict with human well being" (EA, 14).

"The media are called to serve human dignity by helping people live well and function as persons in community. Media do this by encouraging men and women to be conscious of their dignity, enter into the thoughts and feelings of others, cultivate a sense of mutual responsibility, and grow in personal freedom, in respect for others' freedom, and in the capacity for dialogue." (EC, 6)

"The fundamental ethical principle is this: The human person and the human community are the end and measure of the use of the media of social communication; communication should be by persons to persons for the integral development of persons." (EC, 21)

3. What challenges do new media technologies present in the field of communications ethics?

"The Internet is the latest and in many respects most powerful in a line of media...that for many people have progressively eliminated time and space as obstacles to communication during the last century and a half. (...)

The Internet is being put to many good uses now, with the promise of many more, but much harm also can be done by its improper use. Which it will be, good or harm, is largely a matter of choice—a choice to whose making the Church brings two elements of great importance: her commitment to the dignity of the human person and her long tradition of moral wisdom" (EI, 2).

"The new media - telecommunications and internet in particular - are changing the very face of communication; perhaps this is a valuable opportunity to reshape it, to make more visible, as my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II said, the essential and indispensable elements of the truth about the human person" (Benedict XVI, 42nd WCD, 5).

" 'It is necessary to break down the barriers and monopolies which leave so many countries on the margins of development, and to provide all individuals and nations with the basic conditions which will enable them to share in development' (*Centesimus Annus*, 35). Communications and information technology, along with training in its use, is one such basic condition" (EC, 14).

4. Are there ethics guiding use of the media?

“There is great creativity in the use of the new media, such as mobile phones and Internet, especially among young people. Respect for each person’s dignity, privacy and good name is of primary importance” (cfr. EC, 21).

“A community, aware of the influence of the media, should learn to use them for personal and community growth, with the evangelical clarity and inner freedom of those who have learned to know Christ. The media propose, and often impose, a mentality and model of life in constant contrast with the Gospel. In this connection, in many areas one hears of the desire for deeper formation in receiving and using the media, both critically and fruitfully” (EC, 25).

5. What role should the Church have in the field of communications ethics?

“The Church's practice of communication should be exemplary, reflecting the highest standards of truthfulness, accountability, sensitivity to human rights (...) The Church's own media should be committed to communicating the fullness of the truth about the meaning of human life and history, especially as it is contained in God’s revealed word and expressed by the teaching of the Magisterium” (EC, 26).

“Where legal and political structures foster the domination of the media by elites, the Church for its part must urge respect for the right to communicate, including its own right of access to media” (AN, 15).

“It is important that media education be part of pastoral planning and a variety of pastoral and educational programs carried on by the Church, including Catholic schools” (EA, 22).

“The Church would be well served if more of those who hold offices and perform functions in her name received communication training. This is true not only of seminarians, persons in formation in religious communities, and young lay Catholics, but Church personnel generally. Provided the media are neutral, open and honest, they offer well-prepared Christians a frontline missionary role” (EC, 26).

6. What is the role of families and schools with regards to use of the media?

“Like education in general, media education requires formation in the exercise of freedom. This is a demanding task. So often freedom is presented as a relentless search for pleasure or new experiences. Yet this is a condemnation not a liberation! True freedom could never condemn the individual – especially a child – to an insatiable quest for novelty. In the light of truth, authentic freedom is experienced as a definitive response to God’s ‘yes’ to humanity, calling us to choose, not indiscriminately but deliberately, all that is good, true and beautiful. Parents, then, as the guardians of that freedom, while gradually giving their children greater freedom, introduce them to the profound joy of life” (Benedict XVI, 41st WCD, 2).

7. Is there a need for “info-ethics”?

“The role that the means of social communication have acquired in society must now be considered an integral part of the “anthropological” question that is emerging as the key challenge of the third millennium. Just as we see happening in areas such as human life, marriage and the family, and in the great contemporary issues of peace, justice and protection of creation, so too in the sector of social communications there are essential dimensions of the human person and the truth concerning the human person coming into play. (...)

Precisely because we are dealing with realities that have a profound effect on all those dimensions of human life (moral, intellectual, religious, relational, affective, cultural) in which the good of the person is at stake, we must stress that not everything that is technically possible is also ethically permissible. (...)

Many people now think there is a need, in this sphere, for “info-ethics”, just as we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life” (Benedict XVI, 42nd WCD, 3-4).