

## Pontifical Council for Social Communications

### Presentation of Mons. Paul Tighe, Secretary

The last two decades have seen major changes, which have often been characterized as a revolution, in the development of information and communications technology. The letter of Pope Benedict XVI to mark the 42<sup>nd</sup> World Communications Day, which will be celebrated on the 4<sup>th</sup> May 2008, reminds us of the extraordinary potential that the new technologies offer to those who work in the field of communications. The Pope underlines the enormous power for good of these technologies in the hands of those who would use them to promote a world of greater justice and solidarity. He celebrates the contribution of these technologies to the “spread of literacy and in socialization, as well as the development of democracy and dialogue among peoples.”

The Pope, however, also draws attention to the fact that the same technologies can be, and have been, used for less noble purposes. Communications technology can be used to manipulate public opinion, to distort the truth, to promote violence and to debase the dignity of the person. Pope Benedict highlights the “ambiguity of progress, which offers new possibilities for good, but at the same time opens up appalling possibilities for evil that formerly did not exist.”

In his message, Pope Benedict notes that many commentators now believe there is a need in this area for a discipline of “info-ethics” just as we have the discipline of “bio-ethics” in the field of medicine and scientific research linked to life. Indeed his message already serves to highlight some of the foundational ethical insights that would contribute to the development of this relatively new area of reflection. We must avoid what has been identified in bio-ethics as the “technological imperative “. In the field of medicine, we have learned that we ought not to do everything we can do. As the Pope reminds us, it is equally true of the field of communications that “not everything that is technically possible is ethically permissible.”

The true measure of progress is not to be found in the technical or logistical efficiency of the new means of communications alone but in the purposes which they serve. Those in the media who use the new technologies are faced with a choice. They can seek to ensure that the new technologies, and the enhanced potential for communication that they offer, are placed at the service of individuals and communities in their search for the truth or they can allow them to be used to promote their own interests and/or the interests of those they represent in ways that manipulate individuals and communities. It is only when these technologies are used to serve the true wellbeing of individual persons and of human communities that we can say that they are truly instruments of progress.

This message encourages those who work in the media to attend to the great responsibilities that rest with them and to uphold the highest standards of their professions. In particular, they are urged to be vigilant in their efforts to make known the truth and to defend it “against those who tend to deny or destroy it.” Media professionals are invited to defend the ethical underpinnings of their profession and to ensure that the “centrality and the inviolable dignity of the human person” are always vindicated. They

are reminded that these ethical commitments can be eroded by factors such as competition for audiences, commercial pressures and ideological prejudices. They are warned of the danger of the media becoming the voice of “economic materialism and ethical relativism”.

In this context, it is appropriate to remember that many journalists have given an extraordinary witness to their commitment to the truth. Many journalists throughout the world have suffered persecution, imprisonment and even death because of this commitment and because of their unwillingness to be silent in the face of injustice and corruption. Their witness is an eloquent testimony to the highest standards to which the media can aspire and their example serves as to encourage all media professionals to strengthen their commitment to the truth and, thereby, to serve the common good of all humanity.

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