



The Holy See

PAUL VI

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
FOR THE WORLD SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS DAY**

Theme: The Media of Social Communications at the Service of Truth

*Venerable Brothers,
Beloved sons and daughters throughout the world,
and men of good will everywhere,*

Modern man will readily agree that many of his attitudes, judgments and stances on various questions, as well as his allegiances and antagonisms, are heavily influenced and to quite a large extent even shaped by his exposure to ideas and suggestions constantly fed to him by the Mass Media.

In our times, both youth and adult stand in the path of a virtually ceaseless flood: of news and interpretation of the news of image and sound, of proposal and stimulant, of suggestion, invitation and allurements. And in this kind of world a rational being will at one time or another find himself facing the disturbing question - how does one recognize the truth? How is one to isolate it, to sort it out, from this tangle of affirmation and contradiction?

1. Every fact has its own truth, but even a straight and simple fact can have many angles, so it is not always easy to grasp the truth of it in its entirety. But that is not to say that it is impossible; far from it. Given the combined diligence and the combined sincerity of the person who communicates the fact and the person to whom it is communicated, there is a very good guarantee that "the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth" will be safely transmitted.

Sincerity and diligence: a little reflection on the words will reveal what a supremely honourable,

what a thoroughly excellent, service the truly conscientious communicator gives to mankind and to truth, whether he be reporter, editor, information officer or broadcaster. Giving information implies a great deal more than observing and reporting a passing incident. The reporter relates the incident to the context in which it happens. He searches for the causes. He examines the surrounding circumstances, tries to assess the possible effects of this happening.

The work which he does might, in a way, be compared to a piece of "Scientific research", for he must observe the facts carefully, he must check their accuracy, make a critical evaluation of the sources of his information, and finally, pass on his findings, all the time taking due care that nothing essential is overlooked or suppressed.

The burden of responsibility on the reporter is all the heavier when, as often happens, he is called upon not only to give the simple facts of a case but also to explain its implications with comment, assessment or forecast.

2. Where there is question of giving information of a religious character, or of reporting on matters which must be evaluated on religious grounds, the communicator's duty is all the more onerous, though the dignity of his labour is at the same time immeasurably enhanced.

A religious event cannot be adequately understood as long as it is considered in its merely human implications, whether psychological or sociological. For here we have something which bears on the spiritual, which touches on the relationship between man and God. The communicator is therefore faced with the task of attempting to estimate how this relationship is affected by the event which he reports, where it fits into the mystery of salvation. A daunting task indeed, but one which again highlights the nobility of his profession and underlines the truly apostolic dimension in his working day.

The task demands, of course, that he must grasp as far as possible the precisely "religious" truth of particular happenings. He can hope to grasp it fully only on condition that he takes account of the spiritual context of the events in question, and of the whole divine plan to which they must be related. This requires something beyond mere professional competence. It requires the illumination of faith which alone can offer, at least in some circumstances, a full understanding.

3. A similar respect for the truth, a corresponding diligence in the search for it, is demanded of those who have recourse to the mass media for their information. They too have need to pursue the search for truth actively and responsibly. Their consciousness of this responsibility should protect them from a merely passive and uncritical acceptance of whatever happens to be offered to them by the media.

Man, and certainly Christian man, ought never abdicate his right to make his personal contribution to the search for truth, much less allow his capacity for the search to atrophy from disuse. (We

speak here not only of abstract and philosophical truth, but also of the workaday truth of concrete daily happenings.) Were he to do so he would offer an affront to his own personal dignity.

We should like therefore on the present occasion to renew Our invitation to every man to exert himself in this respect; to urge an active acceptance of the consequences which follow from the possession of human dignity and human intelligence; from the gift of an independent personal judgment with the capacity to make its own decisions. Let him meet the assault of the mass media in this state of mind. Using his own judgment, exercising his right to choose, he will freely select from the many opinions presented to him only such as truly merit his assent.

4. Most people are now in daily contact with mass media in one form or another--press, radio, television, theater, cinema or recordings. They depend on the mass media to an increasing extent for news, comment and information, but even more perhaps for entertainment and cultural enrichment. In their enjoyment of a well-produced programme, they become wrapped-up in the plot as it unfolds, identifying with the various characters, involving themselves closely in the real or imaginary situations proposed to their fancy by appropriate artistic techniques. And they are inevitably exposed to the whole range of values, attitudes, sentiments and opinions implied or explicit in the presentation.

We do not intend to suggest that there is anything necessarily deplorable in this. Even fictional publications or shows aimed at giving relaxation and entertainment can help to a better understanding of our fellowmen and of the world in which we live. But it is surely evident that it would be an unhealthy thing if the listener, or reader, or viewer, were to allow his critical faculty to be lulled to sleep. The truth remains a vitally important thing even in a recreational context, and he must remain sufficiently alert to recognize any deviation from the truth in what he reads, hears or sees.

On the other hand, due acceptance must be given to the concept of artistic freedom. To give graphic and dramatic expression to the finer things of life, to give "life" to his creation, the artist is certainly entitled to draw on the resources of imagination. But fanciful creations, while not expected to portray concrete reality, must not, at the same time, deny this reality. Even they have an obligation of fidelity to the truth and to the values inseparable from it. True art, in fact, is one of the noblest human expressions of truth. Therefore, to give a real service to man and to be a true follower of the truth, the artist must help man in his search for truth and in his firm adhesion to it. And this will obviously exclude any exploitation - for quick profits or other unworthy ends - of either the ignorance or the human weaknesses of audiences.

5. We cannot conclude this Message, beloved brothers and children of the modern world, without pointing to a yet higher way to truth, the highest truth. We are Christians, followers of Christ Who is "the way, the truth and the life" (John 14,6) for all men, even for those who do not know Him yet.

He is the Son of God, come among men "to give testimony to the truth" (John 18, 37) and to assure us that only the truth can make us free (John 8, 31-36), liberating us from all slavery (Gal. 5,1).

We Christians want to be in the midst of the world, involved in the human reality of every day, giving witness, humbly but with conviction, to the truth in which we believe.

The modern instruments of social communication are the great new means available to Christians by which they may fulfil their obligation of witnessing to and serving the truth.

These instruments are especially suitable for the expression and diffusion of the word - and we have a supremely important word to say and to entrust to their powerful voice. It is the Word that God speaks of Himself, the absolute and definitive Word that He speaks over man, continuing his saving work through the myriad events in the chronicle of each day and in the history of the ages.

We Christians know that the events which make the fabric of our personal daily lives and of the life of the world we live in are no mere accidents resulting from the whimsy of a blind destiny. They are warp and woof of a mysterious design born in the mind of the Supreme Artist and Architect. It is not yet permitted to us to see the full glory of the tapestry, but we know that every event threaded into its pattern is God reaching out to us, touching us, inviting us into His saving company. He is urging us to a joyous acceptance of all these events and to a loving surrender to His Will.

This profound vision of things is the unassailable truth, the truth of which we wish to be the followers and the witnesses - whether as communicators or as 'receivers'- and by which we will arrive, little by little, at the freedom we seek: freedom from slavery either to human passion or intellectual prejudice; freedom from fear of failure and defeat; freedom from the dominance of power structures or pressure groups striving to impose on us their interpretations of life and events with little concern for what is true; freedom, finally, from that type of opportunism which will deliberately mask or confuse the truth to avoid a personal embarrassment, to cloak something disgraceful, or to make a financial gain.

6. Brothers and beloved children, we entrust you with these considerations about the truth which ought to govern, by common consent, the use we make of the modern instruments of social communication. God, the Supreme Truth, is also the source of the truth of all things. The Truth that came to live among men is the divinely constituted Model of human conduct. If we keep in mind the ultimate purpose of things and if we continue in fidelity to the rules of Christian behaviour, we have already a guarantee that we will remain faithful to the truth in every circumstance.

We wish those priests, religious and laity who serve their brothers through the instruments of social communication to know that they have our approval and encouragement, for their efforts are

guiding their fellows to an encounter with "the true light which enlightens every man" (John 1, 9).

In the confident hope that all, newsmen, information officers, technicians, educators, and their various audiences, will be anxious to use the occasion of this Day to ponder on and profit by our reflections, We impart, from our Heart and with great trust, Our Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 21 April 1972

PAULUS PP. VI

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