



The Holy See

PAUL VI

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

Theme: The Mass Media and Reconciliation

Dear Sons of the Church and all you, men of good will,

The Holy Year supplies us with a theme for Our Message on this "World Day" of Social Communications. The theme is "reconciliation".

Yes, the press and the radio, television and the cinema, ought to be the servants of reconciliation among men in the world. They should be agents of unity, binding all Christians together in solid and visible charity, in the harmony of a single purpose, in a firm orientation towards goodness and towards God.

This annual "Day" is a specially precious and privileged occasion for us all. It gives us a moment to pray together, to reflect together on one subject, to give careful thought to a matter that affects us all vitally, to a fact of our time which can have a powerful bearing on our spiritual well-being.

We pray and reflect today about the mass media. We praise God for these wonderful extensions of His creation which have been brought to such perfection in our time. We recognize the powerful influence for good which, when conscientiously and responsibly used, they can exercise on the individual man and on society. We remind ourselves also that, like so many other good things in creation, they are open to misuse; and, still all together, we consider, before God, what measures may be taken to prevent their desecration.

The communications media undoubtedly have the capacity to stimulate and support all efforts for the true liberation of mankind. They can help man enormously as he struggles to secure the realization of his deepest hopes. But it would be senseless to conceal from ourselves that they

equally, in the hands of users who have a mind to exploit them for less worthy purposes, be employed merely to satisfy superficial needs generated by the imperative of current fashion or whimsy; or worse, to promote or support discriminatory practices in society, to create or emphasize divisions among men.

In Our Message of March 25, 1971, we have already drawn attention to the work mass media can do for the unity of mankind. This year We concentrate on the one essential condition which must be satisfied in social communications in order that mass media may be enabled to create a climate which is favourable to reconciliation. This condition is objectivity, respect for facts, and fidelity to a genuine and reliable scale of values in presenting them. In this connection, We feel bound to express Our esteem and admiration for all those craftsmen of the mass media who strive seriously, earnestly and energetically to make the truth known and to give to that which is good the prominence it deserves.

At the same time, We have to confess that there are certain situations and certain dangers which cause Us concern.

Objectivity in information is something essential and irreplaceable, for each one of us requires to know the truth, in order that he may develop his personality fully according to its yardstick, as well as exercising his social responsibilities on the basis of reliable information. This is our right, and its proper exercise presupposes that facts have been honestly reported. All the better if the bare presentation of the facts is supported with well-informed comment, for this, by placing the facts in the full context in which they occur and by showing what relationship they have to human values, makes it easier to understand their meaning.

But quite evidently, such upright and honourable methods, employed sincerely for the purpose of setting the truth in relief and making it comprehensible, are not to be confused with those processes and techniques which, under the pretence of "neutrality" and "independence", actually set themselves to manipulate the facts and thereby to manipulate also the audiences to which they are presented. For practices of this nature there can be no commendation.

It may serve some purpose to give examples of the aberrations We have in mind, for all should be alert to recognize them for what they are. A biased concentration on human degradation is one example. Another would be working on public opinion in such a way as to create an insatiable greed for endless successions of consumer goods; an imperative craving that can never be satisfied for items that can, in fact, be easily done without. There is the presentation as desirable of manners of behaviour that are either immoral or at odds with what is actually found in real life. There is suppression of facts, distortion of facts, and selective presentation of facts, in reporting important happenings, and this in programmes aimed at ideological conditioning which violate man's right to information and show scant respect for his freedom. There is the fashion of urging new difficulties, sowing new doubts, thus shaking the certainty of people on ethical matters which

are beyond dispute. There is the fashion of representing as art what is simple permissiveness; and the corresponding fashion of putting in a bad light disciplines which are imperatively necessary if people are to live together in civilized society, by representing them as inadmissible oppression. There is the device of presenting as justice what is, in fact, violence, vengeance, or reprisal...

That objectivity in the selection and presentation of facts which will truly promote reconciliation, demands a well-developed sense of responsibility, an adequate training, and a genuinely professional competence. It presupposes a renewal of attitude in cases where it may have been necessary to make one, for it implies a definite about-face from habits that have been, regrettably too often, espoused in the past by the sources of information, by media professionals, and indeed, by a reading, viewing and listening public which was content to be a passive accomplice.

One thing which is very much to be desired is that in all countries availability of information from a variety of sources should be permitted as standard. Instead of forcing the public to rely on one official version of news and interpretation of news, an open dialogue ought to be admitted. This would not only allow the general public to compare the different versions of the news and make an intelligent judgment for themselves, but it would also ensure that a free exchange of valuable ideas could take place among the more noble minds in the community. Failing this possibility one is left with a sort of "tyranny", a "cultural enslavement", imposed by a faceless and quasi-anonymous authority. Paradoxically, its emissions may achieve a certain credence, for while they actually violate the religious, ethical and civic convictions of the people, they do so under the guise of promoting personal and social goods.

We would wish that our expression of concern relating to these matters might contribute positively in securing for social communications the achievements in well-doing for which they undoubtedly enjoy the capacity, and that thus they might truly and adequately fulfil their role in the promotion of human and Christian reconciliation. And We invite all the sons of the Church to assist in every way possible to bring about this happy state of affairs.

It is Our best hope, in fact, that the media workers themselves may feel called upon to defend and to enlarge the freedom of expression which is their right; We mean the freedom which is based on truth on love of the brethren, and on the love of God.

We are certainly not unaware of the difficulties which confront them and of the courage demanded of them, especially when it comes to "satisfying" a public of readers, listeners and viewers, who may seem, often enough, little concerned with the search for truth love. But they are bound, none the less, to give due thought to the responsibility which rests upon them because of the indisputably powerful impact they exercise on information, and consequently on the thinking of their audiences and on their attitudes towards life.

We address Our appeal more pressingly still to those who hold political, social or economic power

over the agents of social communications, urging that they should favour the progress of a sane freedom of information and of expression. Whenever the truth is stifled by unjust economic pressures, by violence on the part of those striving to disrupt civil life, or by compulsion built into the system itself, it is man who is wounded and outraged; his just aspirations are unable to gain a hearing, much less to be satisfied.

On the other hand, the freedom claimed for the mass media does not, and cannot ever, dispense these media from their obligation of fidelity to moral principles, nor from obedience to the civil laws which protect those principles; it is always conditioned, in practice, by the fact that other people have rights which must not be violated, and that life in society imposes certain requirements which must, imperatively, be met. The mass media, then, are under obligation to respect the good name of upright persons, to uphold public decency; in a word, to honour their responsibility as servants of the common good.

It should surely be evident, for example, that media coverage which makes a parade of human depravity, or deliberately provides stimulation for man's immoral inclinations, dishonours the media themselves, while at the same time blunting the moral sense of a community and corrupting its young people. Abuses of this kind cannot take shelter behind the plea of man's "right to information", and neither can permissive legislation be advocated or justified on this plea.

In this connection, as in others, the Church claims no privileges, much less monopolies. She does no more than reaffirm the right and duty of all men to obey God's law; and the right of Her members to be allowed access to the use of the instruments of communication, always showing due respect to the legitimate rights of others. Is it not a fact that all persons and all groups want to be presented fairly by the media; to be given an image that truly reflects what they are without distortion or flattery? It is the right of the Church also that public opinion should know Her as She is, and that it should be given a true picture of Her teaching. Her aspirations and Her life.

In raising these points. We are indicating some of the means by which the path to reconciliation may be smoothed. For reconciliation cannot take place among men except in a climate of respect, of mutual listening, of search for the truth, of willingness to work together. We are certain that the appeal We make will find an echo in the hearts of all men of good will, sick and tired as they are of a relentless conditioning which, on the one part, tends to enslave the mind and heart, and on the other, results only in an aggravation of tensions that are already severe.

We have a special word for Our Brothers and Sons in the faith. To them We say: work with all your energy for reconciliation within the Church, as Our Apostolic Exhortation of last December eight urged. Do what is in your power to ensure that the means of social communication, far from hardening antagonisms among Christians, from accentuating polarizations, from taking sides with pleasure groups, or promoting divisions, may work rather for understanding, for respect, for acceptance of others in love and forgiveness, for the building up of the one Body of Christ in truth

and charity. Without these, there is no true Christianity.

Such is the renewal We implore from God in this Holy Year for the promoters and the beneficiaries of social communications; so that by their devoted efforts, true reconciliation may grow among the groupings of society, among the nations, among all those who believe in God, and especially among the disciples of Christ. May all those who work for these aims enjoy the blessing of the God of peace!

From the Vatican, 19 April 1975

PAULUS PP. VI

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