



The Holy See

PAUL VI

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

Theme: Social Communications and the Fundamental Rights and Duties of Man

Beloved Sons and daughters of the Catholic Church and Men of Goodwill!

The annual celebration of "World Communication Day" is undertaken in fulfillment of a directive imposed by the Second Vatican Council (cfr. Decree, *Inter mirifica* no. 18), and it, happily, provides a suitable occasion for us to remind Ourselves, the People of God, and all the members of the human family, of the extraordinary possibilities and the weighty responsibilities which arise for us all in consequence of the ever-widening influence of the mass-media and their continuing technical advances.

Now, for tenth time, We contribute some thoughts intended to assist the ecclesial Community as it reflects on the theme chosen for the celebration; and intended also to encourage all those who work in the field of mass-media in whatever undertakings they may have in hand concerning the matter of the theme.

At the end of the Holy Year which was, for Christians and for all men, an invitation to reconciliation and to interior renewal, We wished to carry out a sort of search backwards, in the direction, that is, of the primary human values; and so, for this year's theme We selected the subject: "Social Communications and the fundamental rights and duties of man". On behalf of what is ancient and permanent, then, We are appealing for support to what is new and very much of our own modern times: We would wish to mobilize, as far as this is possible to Us, the press and the radio, television and the cinema, and the other vehicles created by art and science for the transmission of ideas, for united action in an enterprise that is authentically good and meritorious.

We are talking, certainly, about "means", media, but their function is not merely to be instruments for establishing contacts and circulating messages; not merely to provide escape and entertainment; the media are also and above all instruments which are very suitable for education and training. It is well known, for instance, how effectively the media are being used in several countries in educational work, supplementing the normal methods of teaching, making a powerful contribution to literacy and to the fuller instruction of the old and new generations. It is precisely because of her recognition that the media of social communication have this educational capacity that the Church proposes, a further objective to them, one which is even more exalted and urgent. It proposes that the mass media should be actively employed in the cause of fundamental human rights and duties.

It is Our observation, in fact, that in one part of the world or another, situations repeat themselves in which people require support as they strive to gain or to exercise the rights to which they are by nature entitled; and while some of these deplorable cases are brought to the notice of public opinion, others no less deplorable receive no publicity, or when they are brought to public attention it is only so that attempts may be made to justify them.

Of what rights do We speak? Is it perhaps necessary to name them once more? We will say quickly: the right to life, to study, to work; and still more fundamental: the right to be born, the right to responsible parenthood; and then, the right to peace, to freedom, to social justice; further, the right to take part in decision-making on matters which touch the life of the individual or of the people as a whole; such as the right of a man to profess and practice his religion, both as an individual and as a member of the community of those who share his faith, without danger of being discriminated against or punished.

For each of these rights, there is a corresponding duty, and We proclaim the duties with equal force and clarity; for to give the rights predominance over the duties would be to provoke an imbalance, which would be reflected in a damaging way in social life. It must be remembered that the reciprocity between rights and duties is an essential thing; the one springs from the other, and vice versa. And it is precisely in this relationship between right and duty that the social communications media will find a safe point of reference when they set themselves to reflect the human reality in their news-programmes and other presentations. It is thus that they will contribute to the progress of civilization.

From a purely humanitarian point of view, there is already sufficient reason for Us to re-emphasize these principles; but our faith supplies still more compelling reasons for doing so. In the mystery of the Word Incarnate we recognize the criterion on which the estimate of man's supreme value is based, and throughout the entire Gospel we find the most authoritative declaration of his rights and duties. Since the Word was made flesh and dwelt amongst us (*John 1,14*), and since He left us as a new commandment an obligation of mutual love on the model of His Own (*cfr. John 15,12*), the Church knows, and is in duty bound to remind all, that every outrage against man's

rights and each failure in the corresponding duties is also a violation of this supreme law.

In every human being who suffers whether because his rights are trampled upon or because he has not been educated to a sense of his own duties, we discover the passion of Christ continuing through our times; and a Christian professional in social communications would do well not to lose sight of this, for it is part of the matter of his own faith, too.

Certainly, there is nothing new about the Church's concern for human rights or for the observance of the consequent duties; We give testimony to it frequently in Our teaching, as Our Predecessors have done before Us. But it is the particular tasks of the instruments of social communication in relation to man's fundamental rights and duties that We would like to point up in this message.

Among these tasks,- and here is something which modern civilization brings into sharp relief,- there is one which, it could be said, rests almost completely on the communications media: it is the task of supplying the correct and complete information which men have a right to. We should say even that it depends, in great part, on the informative-educational activity of the social communications media whether men will or will not have a healthy awareness of their own rights and duties. It is easy, then, to appreciate the weight of responsibility which rests on all those who work in this sensitive field.

In this connection, We feel obliged to call attention to a menacing phenomenon which nowadays renews itself with menacing frequency in different parts of the world: fundamental rights of man are denied, not only as an arbitrary exercise of violence, but also as desires artificially provoked in public opinion, so that what in reality is a flagrant violation of rights appears as a vindication of rights.

We do not wish to affirm by this that the social communications media are solely responsible for such distortions; but neither can it be denied that they can have a considerable influence in "manipulating" ideas, principles, values and interpretations, in diminishing the critical capacity of large sections of the population, in exercising what might be called a sort of cultural oppression, by proposing or exciting only those hopes to which it is intended to respond.

We think that all this, whenever it happens, constitutes a serious affront to any human being, for he is a free creature, made in the image of God. No communicated message may ignore the humanity of the person to whom it is addressed, or impose on him a manner of thinking or of living which is in contrast to the dignity that is proper to him; neither should it seek to dissuade him from developing to the utmost the potential which he carries in himself, nor discourage him from affirming his authentic rights, nor impede him from the fulfillment of the duties consequent on those rights. Prior to achieving dominance over his environment, man needs first to master himself, to conduct himself responsibly; this is one of his deeply felt aspirations. And this spiritual need of his should be respected,- even more, it should be assisted,- by a correct use of the media

of social communication.

In the name of this service to mankind, which is an essential part of the mission entrusted to Us by Christ, We address Our paternal exhortation to the media, urging that they should truly be the servants and the defenders of man's fundamental rights and man's fundamental duties.

From the public Authorities We ask that they should favour the promotion of culture through the communications media; We ask respect for facts and opinions; We ask a genuine search for the truth, which allows man to see what he really is before his fellows and before God; We ask that the findings of this search may be reflected in an attitude of enlightened deference towards the supreme values of the person.

We would wish to ask of the mass-media workers, firstly, sincerity; a true consistency between what they believe and what they transmit in their programmes of news or interpretation of the news; that they should express without equivocation by what ideal of life they are inspired, disdaining to be part of any plan or policy which would seek to "manipulate" their audiences; that they should put the love and service of men before the desire for popularity and before any consideration of economic advantage.

Of the readers and audiences who enjoy the service of the communications media, We ask that they should train themselves to be watchfully critical of what they read and hear, for in this way they will put themselves in a position where they can encourage and support, both morally and materially, the people who write or produce those publications, broadcasts and films which defend man's rights and educate him in his duties; and they will provide themselves, at the same time, with a defence against aggressions or enticements which are contrary to truth and to human dignity.

We ask them to make a well judged estimate of the matter which the media present to them and to qualify themselves to intervene, individually collectively, as the occasion permits, in order to secure improvements in the services of information. Readers, viewers and listeners will always have the deciding word on the future of the communications media, for it is they who decide whether to accept or reject what is offered to them. This gives them a responsibility which they too often ignore.

The Church, on its part, does not claim any special privilege in the field of mass media, but it reaffirms its right and duty to be present in it, enriching its products from the storehouse of its long and universal tradition, a historical and cultural tradition and, above all, one which is religious and educative. This applies whether the media are under public or private management. Where necessary, the Church will maintain its own social communications establishments, not only to enable it to carry out its primary duty of evangelization, but also so that it may be in a position to continue, as in the past, in its role as promoter of integral human development, to affirm man's

rights. And, in fact, that primary duty of the Church to preach the Gospel to every creature (*Mark* 16,15), with the conjoint mission to be an architect of civilization, places on it an obligation to take its proper place in every modern form of communication among men.

With the hope that the media of social communication may offer their positive support in the promotion of man's rights and also in alerting him to his duties, We impart Our Apostolic Blessing from the heart to all who will lend their help towards this noble and difficult achievement, which will so greatly improve the lot of the human family, as it makes its way towards the year 2000.

From the Vatican, 11 April 1976

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