



# The Holy See

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PAUL VI

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

***Theme: Advertising in the Mass Media:  
Benefits, Dangers, Responsibilities***

*Venerable Brothers and beloved Children of the Church, and all you men of good will,*

The dioceses of the Catholic Church, in response to the invitation of the Second Ecumenical Vatican Council (Cfr. Decree *Inter Mirifica*, n.18), again this year celebrate the World Day of Social Communications, in order to help, through reflection, through prayer, by their interest and concern and by moral and material support, the press, the radio, the television, the cinema and the other modern instruments of social communication in the discharge of their important function in information, education, and where the specific responsibility of Christians is concerned, evangelization of the world.

This Day, now being celebrated for the eleventh time, has happily become in many countries an occasion for direct contact between the local Churches and the professionals of the mass media and an opportunity for the growth of better understanding between them. By means of appropriate liturgical and cultural events, it goes some way towards alerting the conscience of the person who uses social communications - whether he be reader, listener, viewer, or cinema spectator,- to the necessity of being selective in what he reads, views and listens to; a selectivity that often effectively influences those responsible on the production end as regards the type of matter they will offer for his consumption. But still more, it stimulates him to make a mature evaluation of the content of the communications which he receives.

For such is the complexity of the communications phenomenon today that it requires not only that society and the individuals who comprise it shall be constantly reminded of their respective duties

and continually refined by being brought face to face with the true values of human life, but also that everyone who exercises influence on the communications process shall do his part.

For this reason, the Church, as well as dedicating the annual Day to a study of all the pastoral questions which arise in the sector of communications, has been careful to call the attention of Christians and men of good will to particular aspects of this very wide subject. The Church hoped, by this means, to help each man to find his direction and keep his balance in the midst of the many-sided reality which is the "mass media". She hoped also to contribute, as the nature of her mission demands, to the common good. This brings us to the theme chosen for this year, "Advertising in the mass media: benefits, dangers, responsibilities", which is intended to focus our reflection on one powerful factor of the present social organization.

It may be asked why advertising and its bearing upon the instruments of social communication should be of interest to the Church. The answer is that advertising is quite important element in the common life of man, because it conditions his integral development and, directly or indirectly, has an influence upon his cultural life. No one now can escape the influence of advertising, and, even apart from the actual content of its messages, it presents, at least suggests particular visions of the world, which inevitably pull at the Christian, affect his judgment, and influence his manner of acting. Advertising, moreover, takes on an ever growing importance, because in large part it finances the development of the communications media and uses them for its own purposes, directly and sometimes dangerously influencing their orientation and their freedom.

The Church looks with favour on the growth of man's productive capacity, and also on the ever widening network of relationships and exchanges between persons and social groups; they are for her a reason, a sign and an anticipation of an ever greater brotherhood, and from this point of view she encourages advertising, which can become a wholesome and efficacious instrument for reciprocal help among men. Another fundamental aspect which the Church recognizes in advertising is its informative aspect, with all the weight and the obligations deriving from it. It has to be truthful, prudent, respectful of man and of his essential values, careful in its choice of the circumstances in which it addresses him, and of the manner in which it makes its presentation.

Advertising is, then, a promotional tool of particular interests which, even if legitimate, must take the common good into account, keep in mind the equally legitimate interests of others, and especially have due regard for the concrete circumstances of the integral development affecting the people to whom it addresses itself, for their cultural and economic environment, and for the level of education they have attained. As is well known, the advertising message is, naturally, designed to convince people, it makes use of techniques based on precise psychological and social knowledge, and it is constantly researching the ways and means of persuasion. It is here, above all that there is imposed on it and, therefore, on those within the advertising profession, the imperative requirement to respect the human person, his right-duty to make a responsible choice, his interior freedom; all these goods would be violated if man's lower inclinations were to be

exploited, or his capacity to reflect and decide compromised.

The vast advertising phenomenon, with its moral and religious implications, involves first of all the instruments of social communication, which often themselves become agents of publicity, but which more usually serve as vehicles for messages coming from other economic agents, and maintain themselves partially or entirely on the revenues earned by carrying the advertising. It can be said, therefore, that all the communicative activity of these instruments is closely linked to the modern phenomenon of advertising, and this connection permits the factors of economic life to help the socially necessary development; but there ought not to be any imposition of conditions which limit the freedom of the media or inhibit the exchange of cultural or religious values (cfr. Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, n. 62)

It is our belief that these guidelines could serve to bring about an advertising respectful of the fundamental rights and duties of man, and deserving of the support of the Christian conscience, if the various categories of professionals concerned were to unite their efforts in collaboration to this end. It is up to the advertising agencies, to the publicity workers and to the directors and managers of the media which carry advertising, to make known to the public, to subscribe to and to apply, the codes of professional ethics which already have been opportunely established so as to have the cooperation of the public in making these codes still better and in enforcing their observance.

All this touches, very often, on delicate moral questions, such as, for instance, the education of youth, respect for woman, the safeguarding of the family and the protection of the rights of the human person (cfr. our Discourse of the European Association of Advertising Agencies, in the audience of April 28, 1976), and it therefore justifies the interest of the Church and, sometimes, her well-founded concern.

How could she remain silent when offence is caused to certain ethical principles? And how could we neglect to utter a strong protest, in which we know we are joined by all men of good will, concerning the widespread display of certain types of cinema publicity which do no honour to our civilization, but which gravely offend the dignity of man, disturb the peace of consciences, and promote disharmony among men? It is for this reason that we ask the bishops, priests and laity engaged in pastoral activity to enter into a healthy and open dialogue with the directors of the publicity process, in respect of reciprocal interests, and in common acknowledgment of the good of human society.

At the same time, we invite the promoters of the Catholic press, those in charge of Catholic transmissions on radio and television, and those who are engaged in any way in any form of social communication, to give the example of their religious conviction and of their ideal of life, precisely by the advertising they choose and by the excellence of their own performance in respect of advertising practice. We request, meanwhile, of the distributors of advertising, that they shall not neglect those channels of communication which give a guarantee to promote and protect moral

principles and which truly favour the development of the person and of his spiritual and human values.

It is our wish also that the Catholic Institutions, in their various kinds and according to their specific character, will follow with constant attention the development of the modern techniques of advertising and will know how to make Opportune use of them in order to spread the Gospel message in a manner which answers the expectations and needs of contemporary man.

With these wishes, we willingly impart our Apostolic Blessing to all those who take part in the celebration of the forthcoming Day of Social Communications and offer the contribution of their mature human experience and of their attentive Christian sensibility to the reflection on this important matter.

*From the Vatican, 12 May 1977*

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