



The Holy See

PAUL VI

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

***Theme: The receiver in Social Communications;
his expectations, his rights, is duties***

Venerable brothers and beloved children,

For the People of God, the annual Social Communications Day is an important occasion. This Day, as you well know, is set aside for deliberate reflection on the instruments of social communication, on the manner in which they operate, and on the use we make of them. The Fathers of Vatican Council II had no hesitation in calling these "marvellous" instruments. Every remotest corner is within their reach, every day they become technically more efficient, the time allotted to their use is constantly increasing. Who, then, could measure the influence they are in a position to exercise on public opinion, or estimate the precise effect of them in terms of value formation or in the determination of the choices people will make?

It should not cause any great surprise, then, that the Church follows the development of a cultural phenomenon of such vast implications with closer and closer attention, or that she never tires of reminding the media directors and their associates of the special responsibilities that go with their office. Moved by the same pastoral concern. We have chosen as the theme of this Message, an examination of the expectations, the rights and the duties of the "recipients", of the person, that is, to whom social communications are directed. Obviously, we look at the recipient from the point of view which is proper to Us, that of a Christian estimate of the person as a living image of God (cfr. *Genesis* 1, 26) and, as such, providentially designed for a transcendent destiny.

The first expectation of "recipients" which should be looked at and evaluated is the possibility for two-way exchange (cfr. Encyclical Letter *Ecclesum Suam*, A.A.S. 56, 1964, p. 659). The space allotted by newspapers and radio and television stations for correspondence with their readers, listeners or viewers, only partly answers this legitimate desire, for it affects always only isolated

cases, while all "recipients" feel the need to be able to express in some way their own opinion and to offer their own personal ideas and proposals. Now, in order to ensure such a dialogue, to promote a two-way exchange and to focus it on the more important problems, the "communicators" will need to establish a continuous and stimulating contact with society and to bring the "recipients" to the point where they are active participants.

The next requirement is for the truth. To be given the truth is a fundamental right of the person, rooted in human nature itself, and closely connected with that right to belong and participate, which present day evolution tends to guarantee to every member of society. This aspiration, this demand for the truth, has a direct bearing on the media of information, from which the recipients have a right to expect up-to-date briefing, honesty, objective research and presentation, respect for the hierarchy of values and, where stage and screen are concerned, a truthful image of man, whether as an individual or as a part of a determined social context.

Nor should the desire of modern man for recreation and rest be lost sight of or undervalued, for he needs to recoup his forces and his psychic equilibrium, so sorely tested by the not infrequently exhausting conditions which life and work today impose upon him. It is a legitimate desire and it has spiritual implications, for with recreation religious and moral questions can arise. Christians are aware that the resolution of these questions, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, brings man to the fullness of his own high destiny.

To satisfy these aspirations, responsible collaboration is required from the "recipient" himself, who ought to take an active part in the formative process of communication. This is not to advocate the creation of pressure groups, which would merely aggravate the tensions and confrontations of the present time. But it could happen that, instead of a "round table of society" to which all would have access by right according to their individual competence and to the importance of the subjects under discussion, use of the media might be restricted to suit the purposes of non representative groups who would thus impose only a point of view favourable to their own vested interest. This must not be allowed to happen, and it is for the "recipient" to see to it that it does not happen. It is, on the contrary, to be urged that, between "communicators" and "recipients", a genuine and authentic dialogue and exchange shall be instituted (cfr. Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, in A.A.S. LXIII/1971, n. 81, p. 623).

This means that it is you, dear readers, listeners, viewers who must learn the language of the social communications media, however difficult that may be, so that you may be in a position to intervene with effect. You must know how to make a good choice when deciding what newspaper or book to buy, what film you will see, what programmes you will listen to on radio, or view on television; all the time conscious that the choice you make is a vote cast for the encouragement and support (even actual economic support) of the publication or programme you favour, and at the same time a vote to reject and discourage those which meet with your disfavour. (cfr. *ibid.* n. 82, p. 624).

It is necessary, further, to bear in mind what a complex thing is modern communications in which, by their nature - and often enough indeed by intent, - truth can appear to be falsehood and good, evil. There is, in fact, no truth, no sacred thing, no moral principle, that cannot be directly or indirectly corroded or contested in the wide-ranging discourse of those communications. You must, for this reason exercise discernment, measuring what you receive from the communications media with the yardstick of genuine ethico-religious values, prizing and accepting the positive elements and excluding those which are negative.

This triple capacity which the "recipient" needs to acquire today in order to be a mature and responsible citizen - the capacity, that is, to understand the language of the mass media, to make opportune choices, and to make sensible assessments, - fits the "recipient" for dialogue with the "communicator". Then, when circumstances arise which require the "recipient's" intervention the intervention should be made in correct and proper form, and while it should be frank and decisive, it should always be courteous.

We are very well aware of the difficulty which, in the concrete circumstances of the contemporary world, is encountered by every "recipient", beginning with those who are Christian, when he sets out to equip himself with the know-how which he requires in order to exercise his rights and duties and fulfil his just aspirations. But if it is true that the future of the human family depends largely on its manner of using the communications media, then it is necessary that training of "recipients" should be regarded as a priority both in the sphere of pastoral ministry and in educational work, generally.

The first steps in media education ought to be taken within the Family; in the field of a total education for life, place must be given to teaching the children to understand the communications media, how to choose among their programmes, and how to assess their content. And the duty rests on parents of helping their own children to make a choice, to work out considered judgments, and to dialogue with the "communicators".

This training, then, should continue in the Schools. The Second Ecumenical Vatican Council imposed this as a specific obligation on Catholic schools of all grades (cfr. Decree *Inter Mirifica*, n. 16) and on Associations of Christian inspiration engaged in education. The Decree added the following: "To bring this about more promptly and effectively, Catholic teachings and policies regarding media are to be presented and explained in catechetical manuals" (Ibid.) . Teachers must remember that they are working in a context in which their pupils are exposed daily to ever so many programmes and transmissions touching in one way or another on faith and moral principles, and that they need therefore to have constant clarifications or corrections made for them.

Local Communities of believers, finally, must help their membership in choosing, understanding and assessing. We make an appeal to the Catholic Press, to the other media which are available

to Dioceses, Parishes and Religious Families, to give their space generously to information on social communications programmes, recommending or advising against them, as the case may be, and explaining the reasons why they are doing so, and thus assisting the faithful to shape their attitude to media programmes in full conformity with the teaching of the Gospel.

Christians, and particularly young people, must bear in mind that to use the communications media wisely is, in the last analysis, a matter of personal responsibility, and that from the choice they make, the holiness of their lives will depend, as also the integrity of their faith and the riches of their culture. And the value of their contribution to the general development of society is also at stake here. Yes, the Church must instruct them and give them every help, but it cannot supply any substitute for their personal consistent decision.

The task as is easily seen, is complex and extremely demanding. Nothing but generous collaboration on the part of all concerned can bring it about that the social communications media not only will abandon expressions and attitudes, unfortunately prevalent enough, which lean to violence, eroticism, vulgarity and egoism and are dictated unjustifiably by particular vested interests, but will reach the point where they offer information which is abundant, carefully checked and truthful, and programmes and shows that are culturally and spiritually wholesome. This would be a notable contribution to that all-embracing humanism which is so close to the Church's heart (Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, A.A.S. 59/1967; n. 42; also see n. 14, p. 264).

Whilst encouraging the efforts of those who give this special service a place of priority in their lifework, We invoke on them and on all who take part in the celebration of the Twelfth World Communications Day and abundance of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and from Our heart we impart to them the Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 28 April 1978

PAULUS PP. VI