



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 13TH WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Social Communications for the Development of the Child"

[Sunday, 27 May 1979]

Dearest Brothers and Children of the Holy Church,

With the same sentiments of sincere trust and living hope which have marked my pastoral service in the Chair of Peter from its beginning, I turn to you, especially to those among you who are engaged in social communications, on the day which is consecrated to this important subject by the wish of the Second Vatican Council (cf. Decree *Inter Mirifica*, 18).

The theme for which I wish to claim your attention contains, in fact, an implicit invitation to trust and hope because it deals with childhood, and I discuss it all the more willingly because it was already selected by my beloved predecessor Paul VI. It is opportune to reflect, in this year declared by the United Nations Organization the "Year of the Child", on the particular needs of this vast band of "receivers"—the children—and on the consequent responsibilities of the adults, particularly those who work in communications and who can and do exercise such great influence on the formation—or unfortunately the malformation—of the young generations. Here is contained the seriousness and the complexity of the subject: "Social Communications: protecting the child and promoting his best interests in the family and in society."

Without making any pretence of examining the subject, or much less, of exhausting the various aspects of it, I wish simply to recall briefly what children have a right to expect and to obtain from the communications media. Enchanted by the instruments of social communication and defenseless against the world and adult persons, they are naturally ready to accept whatever is offered to them, whether good or bad. You, communications professionals, and particularly those

of you who work with the audiovisual media, are well aware of this. They are attracted by the "small screen" and by the "large screen", they follow every gesture represented on them, and they perceive, quicker and better than anyone else, the emotions and sentiments which result.

Like soft wax on which every tiniest pressure leaves a mark, so the child is responsive to every stimulus that plays upon his imagination, his emotions, his instincts and his ideas. Yet the impressions received at this age are the ones which are destined to penetrate most deeply into the psychology of the human being and to condition, often in a lasting way, the successive relationship with himself, with others and with his environment. It was precisely out of an intuition regarding the extreme delicacy of this phase of life that pagan wisdom enunciated the well-known pedagogical guideline which direct that "maxima debetur puero reverentia"; and it is in this same light that we must regard Christ's warning, with its reasoned severity: "Whoever causes one of these little ones who believe in me to sin, it would be better for him to have a great millstone fastened round his neck and to be drowned in the depth of the sea" (Mt 18: 6). And certainly among the "little ones" meant by the Gospel, the children especially are included.

For the believer who intends to base the conduct of his own life on the gospel, the example of Christ has to be the norm. Now, it is as one who lovingly welcomes little children that Christ presents himself (cf. Mk 10:16), as one who defends them in their spontaneous desire to come close to him (cf. Mk 10:14), who praises their typical and trusting simplicity, as being worthy of the kingdom (cf. Mt 18:3-4), and who draws our attention to their interior transparency which disposes them so easily to experience God (cf. Mt 18:10). He does not hesitate to set down a surprising equation: "Whoever receives one such child in my name receives me" (Mt 18:5). As I had occasion to write recently, "The Lord identifies himself with the world of young children... Jesus does not condition children, he does not use children. He calls them, and brings them into his plan for the salvation of the world" (cf. *Message to the President of the Pontifical Society of Missionary Childhood*, [10 April 1979]).

What then shall be the attitude of responsible Christians and especially of parents and mass media workers conscious of their duties in regard to children? They ought, before all else, to take charge of the human growth of the child; any pretence of maintaining a "neutral" position in his regard and of letting him grow up in his own way merely disguises a dangerous lack of interest under the appearance of respect for the child's personality.

No such disengagement in relation to children can be accepted; for children really have a need for help in their development toward maturity. To be sure, there is a great richness and vitality in a child's heart; however, he is not capable, all by himself, of resolving the diverse mysteries and longings that assail him from within. It is on the adults that the duty falls—on the parents, the educators, the communications workers—and it is they also who have the capability of enabling the child to sort things out and find himself. Does not every child in some way resemble the boy Samuel, of whom the Sacred Scripture speaks? Unable to interpret the call of God, he sought help

from his master, who at first replied to him: "No, I did not call you; go back to sleep" (1 Sm 3:5-6). Now, shall we adopt this kind of attitude and smother the inspirations that impel the child to higher things? Shall we not rather help him to understand and respond, as the priest Eli eventually did with Samuel: "If he calls you again, you shall say: Speak Lord, for your servant is listening" (ibid. 3:9).

There are enormous possibilities and means at the disposal of you adults in this connection. You are in a position to arouse the spirit of the children so that they will listen, or to lull it to sleep and—God forbid!—poison it irremediably. What is required is that you should take such action as will cause the child to avail to the fullest of all the possibilities for personal realization and thus insert himself creatively into the stream of life in the world; and this thanks to the pains you take to give him an education which dulls none of his promise or talent but brings out the best in him. You especially who are engaged in the *mass media*, stand by his side and help him in his search for knowledge, giving him cultural and recreational programmes in which he may find an answer to his quest for his identity and for his gradual "entry" into the human community. Then, in your actual programmes, it is important that the child actors should not appear merely in walk-on parts, a diversion to relieve the tired eyes or disenchanted ears of apathetic viewers or listeners, but that they should be allowed to represent characters that can serve as valid models for the younger generation.

I am well aware that in begging you to make this kind of human and "poetic" effort (I use "poetic" in its true meaning as the creative capacity proper to art), I am implicitly asking you to relinquish to some extent your adherence to programme planning geared to instant success and closely tied to maximum audience "ratings." Is not the true work of art, perhaps, that which is born not from ambition to succeed, but from genuine ability and sure professional maturity? Do not exclude from your productions—I ask this of you as a brother—the opportunity to offer the heart of the children a spiritual and religious invitation; and you may take this as a trusting appeal for your collaboration in the spiritual task of the Church.

Similarly I turn to you, parents and educators, and to you, catechists and officials of the various ecclesial Associations, and I urge you to give very serious thought to the problem of the use of the social communications media by and for children, as a matter of capital importance; not only for their enlightened training which, as well as developing their critical sense and teaching them—as you might say—self-discipline in choosing their programmes, helps them along on the human plane, but also for the evolution of the whole society along the lines of uprightness, of truth and of brotherhood.

Dearest brothers and children, childhood is not just any period of human life, which can be isolated from the whole artificially; as a child is flesh of the flesh of his parents, so are all the children a living part of society. It is for this reason that what is at stake in childhood is the fate of the whole of life, of the child's life and of ours, that is, of the life of all. Let us therefore serve childhood,

valuing life and choosing "for" life at every level, and let us help childhood, presenting before the eyes and to the vulnerable and sensitive hearts of the little ones the noblest and highest things in life.

Raising the eyes to this ideal, to me it seems that I meet the gaze of the most sweet Mother of Jesus who, totally given to the service of her divine little Son, "kept all these things in her heart" (Lk 2:51). In the light of her example, I pay honour to the teaching mission which belongs to all of you and, in the confidence that you will carry it out with a love commensurate with its dignity, I bless you from my heart.

From the Vatican, 23May 1979, the first year of my Pontificate.

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