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14th annual Bishops' Meet

"Social Communication in Civil Society: Ethical Challenges"

Bali, Indonesia November 16-21, 2009

SPECIAL REPORT

Some 37 bishops and secretaries for Social Communication in bishops' conferences together with resource persons from 14 different countries celebrated this year's 14th annual "Bishops' Meet" of the FABC Office of Social Communication (OSC) in Bali, Indonesia from November 16 to 21. The theme "Communication in Civil Society: Ethical Challenges" was presented by specialists on human development, media, moral theology and discussed by the participants. Archbishop Claudio Ma. Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication in the Vatican, opened the assembly with a thought provoking keynote address. "The concern for truth will be a core ethical value," the archbishop said. He proposed a dialogical approach to ethics which should be accessible to "all human beings notwithstanding their religions or ideological differences." Here is the full text of this year's "Bishops' Meet" --

FINAL STATEMENT

We, the 37 participants of the 14th Annual FABC-OSC Bishops' Meet from 14 countries comprising bishops, theologians, media experts and communications animators met in Bali, Indonesia, from November 16-21 to study the theme of "Social Communication in Civil Society: Ethical Challenges."

The gradual modernization of Asia over the past 500 years has had a significant impact on many facets and levels of our societies. This has now been given a new impetus with the globalization forces at work over the past 50 years, especially with the emergence of Information Communication Technology as central to many aspects of modern life. Changes in world trade policies and global power shifts are hastening Asia's transition to the global scenario. In fact, experts are talking of the 21st century as "the Asia-Pacific century."

Asia is a continent of tremendous diversity and plurality of cultures, traditions, religions and ethnic communities. It is now experiencing the impact of modernity in a very dramatic way. This phenomenon needs to be studied more closely, carefully and in depth. While we admit the numerous positive contributions of globalization, we cannot ignore the negative repercussions these have on the people of Asia and their ethical implications.

This process of globalization and modernization has created local communities that have received modern education in many of our countries. They experience both the "Asian village and the global village." They are therefore capable of understanding the workings of the different facets of society more comprehensively. Through modern communications technology, we know and understand the meaning of our international global society. We are increasingly becoming conscious of our universal identity and our global destiny.

With this change, Asia is also seeing the resurgence of a new force in society and in public life, namely Civil Society. Just as modernity and modern communications have affected the lives of people of all faiths, they have also become vital contributors to the new force of Civil Society.

The term 'Civil Society' has a range of meanings and nuances for people who live, think and act in diverse contexts and whose understanding of society is shaped by different traditions of social analysis. Drawn towards like-minded men and women of different faiths, in a common quest for greater human dignity, social justice and true freedom, these activists in civil society movements have raised their voices amidst the cacophony of our modernity-driven norms and principles, almost like modern day prophets. Many of them have been influenced, to a greater or lesser extent, by Gospel values and Christian thought.

Orientations

Business has economic power. Governments wield political power. Civil Society uses cultural power to build coalitions and create a moral consensus. Already, it has created noticeable shifts from authoritarian leadership to collaboration and networking as a way of making decisions; from exclusion to inclusion; from consumerism to stewardship; from unrestricted consumption to sharing the world's resources responsibly. What we are witnessing is the emergence of the human dimension of life in a vastly inhuman and uprooted civilization that appears to be losing both its identity and destiny.

The Church cannot be an indifferent observer to these movements and the ethical and moral consequences that follow. As bishops and those engaged in social and pastoral communications, our focus is 'communication of and in human society' which Vatican II called

‘social communication.’ Our concern for truth must be central in determining ethical values in social communication. “A communicator can attempt to inform, to educate, to entertain, to convince, to comfort; but the final worth of any communication lies in its truthfulness” (Benedict XVI, Address to the participants at a convention on “Identity and Mission of a Communications Faculty in a Catholic University” organized by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Rome, May 23, 2008) Asia needs a dialogical approach to ethics in such a way that it becomes accessible to all human beings irrespective of their religious or ideological differences. As believers, we feel especially called to involve the ecclesial movements in the Church, with civil society actors, inspired by her ethical concerns and rich social teachings.

We therefore see the need for Christians to join hands with the civil society actors in the Postmodern Asian society of the 21st Century. Based on what draws us together rather than what separates us, we as Church must open our doors even more to peoples of all cultures and religions, engaging more with civil society, selectively and through a process of discernment. The Social Communications teachings of the Church, as reflected in the FABC communication documents of the past 14 years, provide comprehensive guideposts for us in this respect.

The Church has a common stake with NGOs in supporting the growing demand across Asia for good civil governance, right to information, use of e-governance tools from information technology. The Church also shares with civil society the concern for good corporate governance and greater corporate social responsibility on the part of Western and the newly emerging Asian global companies, hitherto focused only on increasing shareholder value, rather than stakeholder interests.

Recommendations

1. Bishops, with their social communication offices, and especially moral theologians, should study and respond in greater depth to the ethical and moral dimensions of the modern communication culture (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37c) like the digital divide, the rights of children (*Communio et Progressio*, 67f.) to privacy and security, to critical assessment and handling of communication technologies, communication education, the right to information (*Communio et Progressio*, 33-45); they ought to strive towards proper professional standards and the search for truth (cf. *Miranda Prorsus*; *Communio et Progressio*, 17, 36f.; *Aetatis Novae*, 6). For this, the ethical passages and texts of existing Church communication documents should be used as guidelines and signposts for further study, reflection and action.
2. Each diocese needs to define the meaning of 'civil society' in its local environment, making a critical assessment of the aims and objectives of different civil society movements, and identifying genuine and credible movements. We must measure the worth of the causes espoused by them in the light of the Gospel values. “I came that the world may have life and have it abundantly” (Jn 10:10). Such an analysis itself can result in an intuitive vision that becomes the driving force to motivate like-minded people to join civil society movements.
3. Church leaders need to show greater willingness for selective engagement with civil society groups. The Church in Asia is largely a minority, yet it continues its commitment to bear witness to the Gospel through a three-fold dialogue with religions, cultures and the poor. Credible civil society actors provide God-given opportunities for the local Church to join hands with like-minded people of goodwill and become relevant to the people in its midst by sharing insights, facilities and resources in a sustainable manner. Such cooperation can empower civil society to play a more effective role and at the same time enable the Church to manifest its ‘Faith Through Action’ and promote the values that Jesus Christ proclaimed. “We pray to Jesus in the chapel, then go out into the street to find Jesus in disguise” (Mother Teresa). It is important, however, to ensure that the Church involved in this process does not end up being perceived as mere social worker or an NGO.
4. Local Churches need to prepare their own members to develop their sense of ethical responsibility and to play their rightful role in civil society movements through appropriate awareness and formation programmes using the social teachings and other documents of the Church. Such formation should take note of moral guidelines and contemporary issues like use of micro-credit, self-help groups, sustainable development, environmental issues and respecting the rights of future generations to the resources at our disposal. Church organizations can learn a great deal from civil society, especially on how to combine commitment with expertise in the area of research, documentation and statistical data to offer substantial evidence to bolster its cause.
5. Christian communicators must convince the various Commissions and groups and movements in the local Church about the need to develop a proper sense of Christian responsibility/ethics and to join hands with civil society.
6. The Church needs to create a feeling of “togetherness” with civil society to alleviate the sufferings of the people in their midst, as witnessed especially during natural disasters. This sharing of our energies, expertise and resources with those working to empower the marginalized in society, would be an extension of the Eucharist -- living with the people, walking with them, entering into a dialogue inspired by the Holy Spirit to become one with them.
7. Wherever necessary, the local Church should consider promoting its own NGOs to address the larger issues of society, taking care to keep a suitable distance from itself, yet bringing a specifically Christian and Catholic character to their way of working.



Wishing our readers a grace-filled Christmas and Spirit-led New Year!
from the Executive Board and staff of FABC-Office of Social Communication