



FABC
OSC

Communication | N F O

FEDERATION OF ASIAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES - OFFICE OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

P.O. Box 2036, Manila 1099 Philippines

Tel: (+63 2) 732 7170, 338 7769 Fax: (+63 2) 732 7171

Email: fabc_osc@pltdsl.net

Vol. XXV, Nos. 2 & 3
Feb & Mar 2010

44th World Day of Communications
“The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word”
Sunday May 16, 2010

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

The theme of this year's World Communications Day - *The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word* – is meant to coincide with the Church's celebration of the Year for Priests. It focuses attention on the important and sensitive pastoral area of digital communications, in which priests can discover new possibilities for carrying out their ministry *to* and *for* the Word of God. Church communities have always used the modern media for fostering communication, engagement with society, and, increasingly, for encouraging dialogue at a wider level. Yet the recent, explosive growth and greater social impact of these media make them all the more important for a fruitful priestly ministry.

All priests have as their primary duty the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and the communication of his saving grace in the sacraments. Gathered and called by the Word, the Church is the sign and instrument of the communion that God creates with all people, and every priest is called to build up this communion, in Christ and with Christ. Such is the lofty dignity and beauty of the mission of the priest, which responds in a special way to the challenge raised by the Apostle Paul: “The Scripture says, *‘No one who believes in him will be put to shame ... everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.’* But how can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? (Rom 10:11, 13-15).

Responding adequately to this challenge amid today's cultural shifts, to which young people are especially sensitive, necessarily involves using new communications technologies. The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more Saint Paul's exclamation: “Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16) The increased availability of the new technologies demands greater responsibility on the part of those called to proclaim the Word, but it also requires them to become more focused, efficient and compelling in their efforts. Priests stand at the threshold of a new era: as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word.

The spread of multimedia communications and its rich “menu of options” might make us think it sufficient simply to be present on the Web, or to see it only as a space to be filled. Yet priests can rightly be expected to be present in the world of digital communications as faithful witnesses to the Gospel, exercising their proper role as leaders of communities which increasingly express themselves with the different “voices” provided by the digital marketplace. Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis.

Using new communication technologies, priests can introduce people to the life of the Church and help our contemporaries to discover the face of Christ. They will best achieve this aim if they learn, from the time of their formation, how to use these technologies in a competent and appropriate way, shaped by sound theological insights and reflecting a strong priestly spirituality grounded in constant dialogue with the Lord. Yet priests present in the world of digital communications should be less notable for their media savvy than for their priestly heart, their closeness to Christ. This will not only enliven their pastoral outreach, but also will give a “soul” to the fabric of communications that makes up the “Web”.

God's loving care for all people in Christ must be expressed in the digital world not simply as an artifact from the past, or a learned theory, but as something concrete, present and engaging. Our pastoral presence in that world must thus serve to show our contemporaries, especially the many people in our day who experience uncertainty and confusion, "that God is near; that in Christ we all belong to one another" (Benedict XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia*, 21 December 2009).

Who better than a priest, as a man of God, can develop and put into practice, by his competence in current digital technology, a pastoral outreach capable of making God concretely present in today's world and presenting the religious wisdom of the past as a treasure which can inspire our efforts to live in the present with dignity while building a better future? Consecrated men and women working in the media have a special responsibility for opening the door to new forms of encounter, maintaining the quality of human interaction, and showing concern for individuals and their genuine spiritual needs. They can thus help the men and women of our digital age to sense the Lord's presence, to grow in expectation and hope, and to draw near to the Word of God which offers salvation and fosters an integral human development. In this way the Word can traverse the many crossroads created by the intersection of all the different "highways" that form "cyberspace", and show that God has his rightful place in every age, including our own. Thanks to the new communications media, the Lord can walk the streets of our cities and, stopping before the threshold of our homes and our hearts, say once more: "Behold, I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will enter his house and dine with him, and he with me" (Rev 3:20).

In my Message last year, I encouraged leaders in the world of communications to promote a culture of respect for the dignity and value of the human person. This is one of the ways in which the Church is called to exercise a "diaconia of culture" on today's "digital continent". With the Gospels in our hands and in our hearts, we must reaffirm the need to continue preparing ways that lead to the Word of God, while being at the same time constantly attentive to those who continue to seek; indeed, we should encourage their seeking as a first step of evangelization. A pastoral presence in the world of digital communications, precisely because it brings us into contact with the followers of other religions, non-believers and people of every culture, requires sensitivity to those who do not believe, the disheartened and those who have a deep, unarticulated desire for enduring truth and the absolute. Just as the prophet Isaiah envisioned a house of prayer for all peoples (cf. Is 56:7), can we not see the web as also offering a space – like the "Court of the Gentiles" of the Temple of Jerusalem – for those who have not yet come to know God?

The development of the new technologies and the larger digital world represents a great resource for humanity as a whole and for every individual, and it can act as a stimulus to encounter and dialogue. But this development likewise represents a great opportunity for believers. No door can or should be closed to those who, in the name of the risen Christ, are committed to drawing near to others. To priests in particular the new media offer ever new and far-reaching pastoral possibilities, encouraging them to embody the universality of the Church's mission, to build a vast and real fellowship, and to testify in today's world to the new life which comes from hearing the Gospel of Jesus, the eternal Son who came among us for our salvation. At the same time, priests must always bear in mind that the ultimate fruitfulness of their ministry comes from Christ himself, encountered and listened to in prayer; proclaimed in preaching and lived witness; and known, loved and celebrated in the sacraments, especially the Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation.

To my dear brother priests, then, I renew the invitation to make astute use of the unique possibilities offered by modern communications. May the Lord make all of you enthusiastic heralds of the Gospel in the new "agorà" which the current media are opening up.

With this confidence, I invoke upon you the protection of the Mother of God and of the Holy Curè of Ars and, with affection, I impart to each of you my Apostolic Blessing.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2010, Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.



Benedictus PP XVI

HOMILY NOTES AND RESOURCES

- The Message of Pope Benedict XVI for this year's World Communications Day, albeit addressed to all the faithful, highlights the important role that priests can play in the evangelization of the digital world. It is a message that is best understood in continuity with the Pope's Message for 2009 and that builds on the insights expressed therein concerning the potential of the new media to *permit the almost instantaneous communication of words and images across enormous distances and to some of the most isolated corners of the world* and thereby enhance the possibilities for the proclamation of the Good News of God's love for all people, revealed in the person and teachings of Jesus.
- In 2009, the Pope said: *It falls, in particular, to young people, who have an almost spontaneous affinity for the new means of communication, to take on the responsibility for the evangelization of this "digital continent"*. This year, the message is inviting priests to see how the digital technologies, and the new forms of communications they permit, can add a new dimension to their pastoral ministry. *Who better than a priest, as a man of God, can develop and put into practice, by his competence in current digital technology, a pastoral outreach capable of making God concretely present in today's world and presenting the religious wisdom of the past as a treasure which can inspire our efforts to live in the present with dignity while building a better future?*
- The Message serves as an exhortation rather than as an instruction: the message, although it mentions the importance of *images, videos, animated features, blogs, websites* and takes for granted the need for adequate formation in the use of the new technologies, should not be read as a technical manual but rather as a profoundly theological reflection on the enormous potential of the technologies to enhance and enrich the ministry of priests. In this article, I would like to look more closely at the Message through the filter of a number of theological insights. The Message can be profitably read through the filter of a number of theological insights: these insights are implicit rather than explicit in the text of the Message but they serve to deepen our analysis and help us to elucidate some concrete indications for priests concerning their emerging engagement with the digital world.
- First, we find in the message of the Pope this year a very clear **theology of priesthood**. He talks about the priest as the man of God. The word consecrated is used frequently: at the core of this consecration is precisely the priest's relationship to the Word of God. *All priests have as their primary duty the proclamation of Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, and the communication of his saving grace in the sacraments*. Again in the message we are told that priests should be witnesses to the Gospel. They should be in constant *dialogue with the Gospel*. They should come with the *Gospel in hand and heart*. The Pope is saying that the priest's communicative ministry must begin with his own profound listening to and meditation of the Gospel. Such meditation allows the Gospel to shape his being and ministry. Priests must strive to be people of the Gospel who as the message says will be more *notable for our priestly hearts rather than for our technical savvy*. The Pope also says that the priest should be an *enthusiastic herald* of the Gospel.
- This gives us some indication of the nature of the priest's involvement in the web. The priest is on the web above all as somebody who will bring the Gospel. The web is a place for enthusiasts. On the web we find enthusiasts and people who are passionate about various projects, ideas, hobbies and aspects of human experience; who are sharing, discussing and learning about their interests. For priests, the web can be a forum where they express their enthusiasm for the Gospel, where they can share their understanding of the Gospel with others, where they can learn from other priests and other experts to grow in appreciation of the Gospel. We now have access to great, rich resources that can strengthen and develop our preaching.
- The web is to be understood not just as a place to pass time; we have reasons for being there. This requires that the priest will give a ministerial focus to presence in cyberspace. The priest should be present precisely as a priest. The Church is blessed in the fact that some priests are very competent at the level of technology and are good at finding appropriate forms of expression that allow them to communicate effectively in the digital environment. These are valuable talents, but on their own they are not sufficient. What is absolutely essential is that the priest be a man of the Gospel. He can find the technical know how. He can learn fluency. He can purchase these services. Better still, he can find them in his parish and community; but the priest must bring his own witness and the fruits of his personal engagement with the Gospel. That is what is indispensable.
- The second theological insight that echoes through this Message is its **Christology**. Christ is the saviour of all people. His words and his teachings offer hope to all. His love is without limits. The Pope uses a particularly felicitous expression when he says *God is near, in Christ we all belong to one another*. In the document, we see the consequences of that. For the Pope, the web is a place where we can bring Christ's message to all people, where we can proclaim *the new life which comes from hearing the Gospel of Jesus, the eternal Son who came among us for our salvation*. There is a particular attentiveness in the Pope's message to those who are far from the Church; those who are unsure and uncertain; those who perhaps doubt, but whose doubt is in fact a point of openness. And we need to be attentive to them because the message of Christ, which is the only message that offers fundamental hope to human beings, has been entrusted to us and we must bring it to others. The Gospel message is not just something for us or to keep for our own benefit; otherwise, we have failed Christ. There are many valid and worthwhile things priests may wish to say *on-line* but they must always give a priority to making known the person and the message of Jesus; this has implications not just for the content of the contributions of priests but for their tone.
- We also find in the message a very strong **theology of culture**. It is in and through culture that people express their deepest sense of who they are. We do this in the political structures we create. We do it in and through our art and literature, through our forms of community living. The Pope has long insisted on the need for believers to be present in the formation of culture – he calls this a "diaconate of culture". We need to be present through rational discourse where we bring the insights of faith to bear through our reflection on human wellbeing. We need to ensure artistic expression is touched with the message of the Gospel: at a major gathering recently in the Vatican the Pope gathered artists and invited them to open the human spirit to the transcendent message of God's love. When the Pope speaks about music, as he frequently does, he highlights the capacity of music to enrich and nourish the soul, to keep alive that yearning and searching that is distinctively human.

- In his latest encyclical the Pope has reflected on how we need forms of social solidarity, of living together, that ensure that we bring the deepest human values to our political and economic structures. For the Pope, the web opens up a possibility of there being a place, a forum, an agora where there can be debate and dialogue. Believers must be present there, bringing the insights of our faith into the debates that will happen. The Pope is very clear that new technologies on their own will not achieve this objective: *Just because social communications increase the possibilities of interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalize development and democracy for all. To achieve goals of this kind, they need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity. (Caritas in veritate, 73.)*
- Pope Benedict develops the idea of the internet precisely as a place of encounter between believers and non-believers. He uses the image of the **“Court of the Gentiles”** to express this reality. Whereas access to the Temple of Jerusalem was reserved to Jewish males, the Court of the Gentiles was open to the Gentiles and it became a privileged place of meeting between Jewish believers, coming and going from the sacred area that was the Temple, and their non-Jewish neighbours. It was almost a half-way house between the sacred and the purely secular arena. The Pope suggests that the internet could exercise a similar function: *Just as the prophet Isaiah envisioned a house of prayer for all peoples (cf. Is 56:7), can we not see the web as also offering a space - like the “Court of the Gentiles” of the Temple of Jerusalem - for those who have not yet come to know God?*
- If priests take up the invitation of Pope Benedict and enter into dialogue with those, who in their browsing and searching of the internet, are ultimately in pursuit of truth, hope and meaning in life; and if they can further introduce them to the Good News of the Gospel, they will serve not only the Gospel but the good of humanity. If priests bring their deepest convictions with them as they go on-line, and encourage others to debate the ultimate questions; they, as Pope Benedict says, *will not only enliven their pastoral outreach, but also will give a “soul” to the fabric of communications that makes up the “Web”.*
- In countries where the **Feast of the Ascension** is celebrated and the Gospel of Luke (24: 46 – 53) is proclaimed, it would be most appropriate to highlight the universal nature of the Church’s call to proclaim the Gospel. *Jesus said to his disciples: “Thus it is written that the Christ would suffer and rise from the dead on the third day and that repentance, for the forgiveness of sins, would be preached in his name to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem.* The homilist might also seek to develop the understanding of the Ascension as an invitation to mission. The Risen Lord distances himself from his immediate disciples and from the land where he has exercised his earthly ministry in order to be present to all people throughout history and in every corner of our world. The internet could be presented as a way of bringing his word and message to *“all the nations”* of our world. Like the disciples, we must learn to bring our contemporaries to a greater sense of the Lord’s abiding presence – in the words of the first reading: *“Men of Galilee, why are you standing there looking at the sky? This Jesus who has been taken up from you into heaven will return in the same way as you have seen him going into heaven.”*
- In countries where the Seventh Sunday of Easter is celebrated and the Gospel of John (17: 20 - 26) is proclaimed, it would be helpful to note that Jesus prays that his disciples will remain close to him so that they will bring his words to others. *Lifting up his eyes to heaven, Jesus prayed saying: “Holy Father, I pray not only for them, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me.”* This would allow the homilist to highlight the need for all who are called to preach the Gospel to cultivate their sense of closeness to Jesus. If we are to proclaim the Good News with conviction; we must, like Stephen in the first reading, be “filled with the Holy Spirit”.

READINGS

Scripture readings from the *Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord* or *VIIth Sunday of Easter*.

PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

CELEBRANT: God, our Father, with trust in your mercy and goodness, we address our prayers and petitions to you.

LECTOR: We pray for the Church, for the community of believers. May the Church’s missionary spirit be enriched by the diverse ways of preaching the Word of God in a digital world. *Response:* _____

We pray for Pope Benedict, the Bishops and those who work with them. May they be passionate witnesses to the Word of God so that through their lives they may bring all people closer to God’s love in Christ Jesus. *R/*

We pray for those who work in the Church’s mission of communication. May the new technologies help bring about more fruitful exchange and dialogue, strengthening communion in efforts to courageously proclaim the Gospel. *. R/*

We pray for all leaders. May they seek to respect human dignity and to protect the most vulnerable, the poor and children, especially in the digital world. *R/*

We pray for all those who, because of poverty or lack of opportunity, feel excluded from the digital world. May the Lord bless the efforts of those who work to share the benefits of technology with all peoples. *R/*

We pray for those who participate in and contribute to the digital world. May they be attentive to the true needs of the human person and promote dialogue, encounter and solidarity among all. *R/*

CELEBRANT: Heavenly Father, hear our prayers - our spoken prayers and the silent prayers of our hearts. Grant these and all our needs through Christ, our Lord. Amen.

