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"Social Communication in Catholic Universities of Asia: Facts, Experiences, Challenges"
Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand May 11-16, 2009

ORIENTATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

We, the 67 participants - bishops, and representatives of 34 Catholic Universities and colleges in Asia from 13 countries - gathered for the seventh "Bishops' Institute for Social Communication" (BISCOM VII) on "Social Communication in Catholic Universities of Asia: Facts, Experiences, Challenges" at Assumption University, Bangkok, Thailand, May 11-16, 2009.

This Asia level meeting of Catholic universities with communication programs drew inspiration from a similar conference organized at world level by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in Rome in May, 2008. It was convened by the Federation of Asian Bishops' Conferences - Office of Social Communication (FABC-OSC) in cooperation with the Pontifical Council for Social Communications in the Vatican.

The participants were reminded of the Apostolic Exhortation of Pope John Paul II on the identity and mission of a Catholic university, *Ex Corde Ecclesiae* (ECE, 1990), which says:

"Scientific and technological discoveries create an enormous economic and industrial growth, but they also inescapably require the correspondingly necessary search for meaning in order to guarantee that the new discoveries be used for the authentic good of individuals and of human society as a whole." (no. 7) Catholic universities are to assist in the "advancement of human dignity and of a cultural heritage through research, teaching and various services offered to the local, national and international communities." (no. 12)

Already the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971), which was demanded by Vatican II's *Inter Mirifica*, states that:

"There is room for study, in much greater depth, of the effects of social communications on different cultural environments and on different types of people," and called for "a rigorous program of scientific research." (no. 184) It reminded Catholic universities "to be more assiduous in the promotion of scientific studies and research on social communication" (no. 113), because the Church is eager to learn from the world of researchers in all these areas and to follow up its practical conclusions. The Church also assures communication scholars that "the problems they face are not only urgent, they are also consonant with the dignity of the traditional disciplines." (no. 184)

The meeting traced the development of the concept of "Social Communication" as proposed and accepted by the Second Vatican Council document, *Inter Mirifica*, in 1963. "Social Communication" includes all ways and means of communicating in human society which goes beyond any narrow understanding of communication as 'mass media' or 'technical instruments' only. It denotes all social dimensions and processes of communication including structures, technology, symbols, social interactions and divine self-communication, which refers to the theological dimension of the expression.

Orientations

A preliminary survey indicated that there are some 50 Catholic universities in Asia which offer communication programs. In addition, there are also a number of Catholic colleges teaching communication.

Considering the nature and identity of a Catholic university with communication programs in Asia, the participants reaffirmed the reality of Asia as a continent marked by religious pluralism, cultural diversity and poverty. We underlined the importance of developing a distinctly Catholic ethos and vision rooted in the Gospels and the teachings of the Church for the formation and training of students in our communication faculties. This vision was seen within the overall principles and guidelines of numerous Church documents which also recognize the need to situate this formation into the context of an emerging media technology with a growing need for proper media ecology. This communication environment takes into consideration the physical environment characterized by technologies and tools, on the one hand, and the social and symbolic environment made up of content and relationships, on the other. Theological considerations, like those of Bernard Lonergan, Avery Dulles, and Carlo Martini help deepen the understanding of the close relationship between communication and theology, especially Ecclesiology and Biblical Theology; thus, enabling us to place communication at the heart of the Church's identity and mission.

John Paul II referred, in his Encyclical letter *Redemptoris Missio* (1990), to a "New Culture" characterized by "new ways of communicating." He describes social communication as the "first *Areopagus* of the modern age," which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a global village: "The means of social communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behaviour as individuals, families and within society at large." The Pope also places communication in the context of evangelization of culture when he writes: "Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the 'new culture' created by modern communications." (RM, no.37c) This has important consequences for our studies and teaching.

The Catholic universities with communication programs in Asia are confronted by several challenges which include a broadening of the scope of social communication formation that goes beyond a mere emphasis on technology, skills or professional excellence. We must also pay attention to imparting a formation which is based on a fully human and Christian vision of the world rooted in the values of the Gospel.

Social Communication programs of Catholic universities in Asia also need to mirror a theological perspective which is rooted in a distinctively Christian ethos. This vision is manifested in fostering and promoting values like justice, as well as affirming human rights, the dignity and love of

one's neighbour. It is also characterized by theological and cultural underpinnings which reveal the sacramental presence of God, recognize the importance of community, and the action of the Creator as reflected in the world. In a world redeemed and restored to goodness by Christ, people will find the obligation towards a community of service. The self-emptying of Christ serves as the model for divine-human as well as interpersonal and social communication.

Ethics occupy a pre-eminent role in a Catholic communication program. Church documents stress the importance of the means of social communication to foster public opinion, the right to information, and communication. (*Communio et Progressio*, nos. 24-47) It calls for cooperation among citizens, civil society, nations as well as among Christians, believers, and all people of good will. Catholic communication education includes ethics and methods of ethical analysis. Even when the specific contexts and interpretations of the problems and issues may vary, the students are to be trained to understand ethical issues beyond 'Codes of Conduct,' and to critique communication content as well as to create it.

Such a communication environment for teaching and life should be the hallmark of Catholic communication education. It can only be created when we ourselves are committed to live this vision, and when we live to unfold the action of God's Holy Spirit in the ongoing work of creation.

We also need to help students to discover the Christian community dimension of all social communication. This should be manifested in the numerous social networking and communication practices of the young. Technological innovations in communication that assist this process of social communication can enable us to rediscover the meaning and identity of community from a truly Christian perspective.

Communication formation must go beyond rhetoric. In an environment dominated by art, music, film, radio, television, Internet sites, community and worship, one should seek to develop values of goodness, truth, and beauty as these reveal God in different ways in our times.

Catholic educators are also challenged to nourish the imagination of our students by helping them create a context of the sacramental and communitarian vision of the world. Catholic communication education should help to promote and highlight culture, to value culture and human achievement.

The participants recognized the importance of developing a deep spirituality in the Christian communicator, rooted in prayer yet attuned to being as much as possible like Christ, the "perfect communicator." (*Communio et Progressio*, no. 11)

As Asia is the cradle of all major religions, the people possess a relentless quest for the divine. We, as Catholic universities, need to be convinced of the fact that communication is essential for developing an effective interreligious dialogue at all levels, to foster mutual understanding, respect, cooperation and to promote harmony.

While recognizing and affirming the great contribution of the Catholic universities in the field of communication, the participants underlined the need to go beyond what we have done in the past to meet the challenges before us.

Recommendations

The participants have made the following recommendations:

Catholic universities, in their communication programs, should strive to:

1. Promote a truly Catholic ethos based on Catholic intellectual traditions, vision and value systems at the level of teaching, management, and the overall education programme.
2. Foster and promote Catholic values, faith formation, theology, Christian ethical principles in theory and praxis, especially when these institutions are situated in primarily Christian contexts and serve Christian and Catholic students. In non-Christian countries, misunderstandings and prejudices about the mission of the Church should be clarified, and a positive image of the universal values of the Christian faith developed.
3. Become agents of the evangelising mission of the Church in ways that are appropriate to the particular socio-cultural, religious and economic contexts in which they work, especially in promoting dialogue between religions, cultures, reaching out in service with special attention to the poor in Asia, and thus, foster mutual respect and harmony.
4. Develop a clear vision and mission, and become catalysts and agents in the promotion of universal values of human rights and dignity, social justice, freedom, solidarity, promotion of environment, gender equality and integral development.
5. Develop common guidelines and parameters for teaching and research, to define their Catholic identity in the context of religious pluralism and cultural diversity that is so characteristic of Asia.
6. Pay attention to careful recruitment, and on-going formation and training of the teaching staff. Irrespective of their religious identity, educators ought to be moulded in the overall mission of the Catholic institution they serve as educators.
7. Foster a student-teacher relationship that leads to fruitful and lasting mentoring, guidance, and exchange both within the campus and later in their professional areas of work.
8. Promote greater networking and collaboration among universities with communication programs in Asia, effective student and staff exchange, common updating, on-going formation and training programmes, as well as sharing in the area of research, development of resources, teaching aids, publications, and electronic exchange. Collaboration with other Christian universities and those of other religions should also be promoted.
9. Form and train students to become responsible communication/media professionals with effective language and technical skills, enabling them to be integrated and ethically sound individuals rooted in Christian values, social responsibility and commitment.
10. Encourage staff and students to participate in mainstream media and professional organizations through their publications, productions and become agents of advocacy for the common good of society.
11. Develop systematic research on social, religious and ethical issues; Conduct periodic evaluations, feedback and review of the methodology, content and impact of formation and training programmes for individuals and society. Proper funding for these activities should be secured.
12. Use the modern means of communication, but also promote, with greater commitment, alternative and low cost media in the academic curriculum, communication theory and praxis to bridge the information divide that characterises the communication situation in Asia.
13. Become active partners and agents in promoting communication/media education within the university campuses and communities. Help individuals in the modern Internet age to become aware of their communicating possibilities and responsibilities.

