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42nd World Communication Day

Theme> **The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service.
Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others.**

Sunday May 4, 2008

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The theme of this year's World Communications Day - "*The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others*" - sheds light on the important role of the media in the life of individuals and society. Truly, there is no area of human experience, especially given the vast phenomenon of globalization, in which the media have not become an integral part of interpersonal relations and of social, economic, political and religious development. As I said in my Message for this year's World Day of Peace (1 January 2008): "The social communications media, in particular, because of their educational potential, have a special responsibility for promoting respect for the family, making clear its expectations and rights, and presenting all its beauty" (No. 5).

2. In view of their meteoric technological evolution, the media have acquired extraordinary potential, while raising new and hitherto unimaginable questions and problems. There is no denying the contribution they can make to the diffusion of news, to knowledge of facts and to the dissemination of information: they have played a decisive part, for example, in the spread of literacy and in socialization, as well as the development of democracy and dialogue among peoples. Without their contribution it would truly be difficult to foster and strengthen understanding between nations, to breathe life into peace dialogues around the globe, to guarantee the primary good of access to information, while at the same time ensuring the free circulation of ideas, especially those promoting the ideals of solidarity and social justice. Indeed, the media, taken overall, are not only vehicles for spreading ideas: they can and should also be instruments at the service of a world of greater justice and solidarity. Unfortunately, though, they risk being transformed into systems aimed at subjecting humanity to agendas dictated by the dominant interests of the day. This is what happens when communication is used for ideological purposes or for the aggressive advertising of consumer products. While claiming to represent reality, it can tend to legitimize or impose distorted models of personal, family or social life. Moreover, in order to attract listeners and increase the size of audiences, it does not hesitate at times to have recourse to vulgarity and violence, and to overstep the mark. The media can also present and support models of development which serve to increase rather than reduce the technological divide between rich and poor countries.

3. Humanity today is at a crossroads. One could properly apply to the media what I wrote in the Encyclical *Spe Salvi* concerning the ambiguity of progress, which offers new possibilities for good, but at the same time opens up appalling possibilities for evil that formerly did not exist (cf. No. 22). We must ask, therefore, whether it is wise to allow the instruments of social communication to be exploited for indiscriminate "self-promotion" or to end up in the hands of those who use them to manipulate consciences. Should it not be a priority to ensure that they remain at the service of the person and of the common good, and that they foster "man's ethical formation ... man's inner growth" (*ibid.*)? Their extraordinary impact on the lives of individuals and on society is widely acknowledged, yet today it is necessary to stress the radical shift, one might even say the complete change of role, that they are currently undergoing. Today, communication seems increasingly to claim not simply to represent reality, but to determine it, owing to the power and the force of suggestion that it possesses. It is clear, for example, that in certain situations the media are used not for the proper purpose of disseminating information, but to "create" events. This dangerous change in function has been noted with concern by many Church leaders. Precisely

because we are dealing with realities that have a profound effect on all those dimensions of human life (moral, intellectual, religious, relational, affective, cultural) in which the good of the person is at stake, we must stress that not everything that is technically possible is also ethically permissible. Hence, the impact of the communications media on modern life raises unavoidable questions, which require choices and solutions that can no longer be deferred.

4. The role that the means of social communication have acquired in society must now be considered an integral part of the "anthropological" question that is emerging as the key challenge of the third millennium. Just as we see happening in areas such as human life, marriage and the family, and in the great contemporary issues of peace, justice and protection of creation, so too in the sector of social communications there are essential dimensions of the human person and the truth concerning the human person coming into play. When communication loses its ethical underpinning and eludes society's control, it ends up no longer taking into account the centrality and inviolable dignity of the human person. As a result it risks exercising a negative influence on people's consciences and choices and definitively conditioning their freedom and their very lives. For this reason it is essential that social communications should assiduously defend the person and fully respect human dignity. Many people now think there is a need, in this sphere, for "info-ethics", just as we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life.

5. The media must avoid becoming spokesmen for economic materialism and ethical relativism, true scourges of our time. Instead, they can and must contribute to making known the truth about humanity, and defending it against those who tend to deny or destroy it. One might even say that seeking and presenting the truth about humanity constitutes the highest vocation of social communication. Utilizing for this purpose the many refined and engaging techniques that the media have at their disposal is an exciting task, entrusted in the first place to managers and operators in the sector. Yet it is a task which to some degree concerns us all, because we are all consumers and operators of social communications in this era of globalization. The new media - telecommunications and internet in particular - are changing the very face of communication; perhaps this is a valuable opportunity to reshape it, to make more visible, as my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II said, the essential and indispensable elements of the truth about the human person (cf. Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, 10).

6. Man thirsts for truth, he seeks truth; this fact is illustrated by the attention and the success achieved by so many publications, programmes or quality fiction in which the truth, beauty and greatness of the person, including the religious dimension of the person, are acknowledged and favourably presented. Jesus said: "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free" (*Jn* 8:32). The truth which makes us free is Christ, because only he can respond fully to the thirst for life and love that is present in the human heart. Those who have encountered him and have enthusiastically welcomed his message experience the irrepressible desire to share and communicate this truth. As Saint John writes, "That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete" (1 *Jn* 1:1-3).

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to raise up courageous communicators and authentic witnesses to the truth, faithful to Christ's mandate and enthusiastic for the message of the faith, communicators who will "interpret modern cultural needs, committing themselves to approaching the communications age not as a time of alienation and confusion, but as a valuable time for the quest for the truth and for developing communion between persons and peoples" (John Paul II, *Address to the Conference for those working in Communications and Culture*, 9 November 2002).

With these wishes, I cordially impart my Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2008, *Feast of Saint Francis de Sales*.

Benedictus PP XII

INTRODUCTORY COMMENTS

The communications media continue to play a central role in the phenomenon of globalization. The instruments of social communication, by their own nature, have helped create a global village and profoundly influence the choices that are made. This reality can present risks whereby media professionals or organizations for a variety of reasons may be tempted to create their own news and diffuse information which may not be accurate or which aims only to sensationalize.

The theme of the 42nd World Communications Day focuses on the social dimension of this phenomenon and its effects on the Church. It appeals to the consciences of all to work for greater awareness of what is happening and to make the search for truth a primary goal.

The communications media have various levels of responsibility in this process, ranging from producers to consumers and involving single individuals or groups of persons. The final media product is often the result of many efforts and concrete choices, which all contribute to the positive, negative or mixed outcome it may generate.

One area of special concern is the emphasis often given to violence or vulgarity. Although both are a reality of life, sometimes they are given undue prominence, which gives the idea that the media may even be promoting them. These situations call for an appeal to conscience and a respect for truth. From a pastoral point of view, consciences must be formed, enlightened and corrected, if necessary. The search for truth for the Christian is an encounter with Christ, who is the fullness of truth, the way and the life.

It is necessary to move beyond passivity in the face of media products without any respect for truth or The Truth. Media programs should not be accepted in a non-critical or neutral manner only. The values and role models which they highlight must be studied and evaluated.

With the production of any television show, film or newspaper, there are many men and women making key decisions at various levels, whether regarding the technical, production or creative aspects. This is why the desire for truth, inherent in the heart of every person, can help make an impact in awakening a critical conscience of media consumers.

To conscientise consumers in this way means to know also how to decipher the codes and languages used by the media since the images, sounds and messages presented are determined by the decisions of media professionals. This is even more true today when anyone can be a media producer with the new media.

It is up to us to call for better content in the media. As media consumers, we can make our voice heard also through the choices we make. If we are media creators or producers, the decisions we make should be in favor of bringing forward positive, true and uplifting perspectives and role models through and in our work.

This year's message traces an authentic pastoral journey, starting from knowledge and use of the media and concluding with the rediscovery of Christ, fullness of truth, the way and the life.

READINGS

“To make the Church’s multiple apostolate in the field of social communication more effective, a day is to be set aside each year in every diocese, at the bishop’s discretion, on which the faithful will be reminded of their duties in this domain. They should be asked to pray for the success of the Church’s apostolate in this field and to contribute toward it, their contributions to be scrupulously employed for the support and the further development of the projects which the Church has initiated in view of the needs of the entire Church.”

(Conciliar Decree INTER MIRIFICA n.18)

READINGS

SOLEMNITY OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

VII SUNDAY OF EASTER

Given that the celebration of World Communications Day this year falls on Sunday, May 4th, the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord, the readings below are those for that day:

Acts 1:1-11

“As they were looking on, he was lifted up”

Psalms 47

“God mounts the throne amid shouts of joy; the Lord, amid trumpet blasts”

Eph 1:17-23

“May the eyes of your hearts be enlightened, that you may know what is the hope that belongs to his call...in accord with the exercise of his great might, which he worked in Christ, raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens.”

Mt 28:16-20

“All power in heaven and on earth has been given to me.”



PRAYERS OF THE FAITHFUL

CELEBRANT: Merciful Father, help us to be faithful to your son Jesus Christ, who is the way, the truth and the life. Let your spirit guide us so that in all our communications we will seek to be “at the service of a world of greater justice and solidarity.”

RESPONSE: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

LECTOR: We pray for our Holy Father, Benedict XVI, that the Lord may affirm him in his ministry and that his words of encouragement to all those who work in the area of communications will be a source of strength to them in their efforts to build a world of justice and peace. We pray to the Lord ... R: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

We pray for all those who minister in the Church, that their efforts to communicate the Good News of a God whose love is enduring and without limit will touch the hearts and minds of all people of good will. We pray to the Lord ... R: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

We pray for all members of the human community, that in their use and employment of the means of communications they will seek to promote “respect for the family, making clear its expectations and rights, and presenting all its beauty”. We pray to the Lord ... R: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

We pray for leaders of government and civil society, that they may promote a use of the communications media that respects the dignity of the human person and fosters the ethical formation and inner growth of all. We pray to the Lord ... R: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

We pray for all journalists, communicators and human rights defenders who are persecuted or killed for giving witness in favour of truth. May their witness inspire a deeper respect for human life from conception to natural death. We pray to the Lord ... R: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

We pray for Christians active in the world of communications. May the Holy Spirit inspire their efforts to promote a culture where “publications, programmes or quality fiction in which the truth, beauty and greatness of the person, including the religious dimension of the person, are acknowledged and favourably presented.” We pray to the Lord ... R: *Lord, help us to work for peace and unity, in your love ...*

CELEBRANT: God our Father, we pray that the Good News revealed by your Son, the Word made flesh, will continue to bring hope and joy to all people. We make this our prayer through the intercession of your Son Jesus Christ. Amen.