

Address of Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli,  
President, Pontifical Council for Social Communications  
FABC-OSC - 13<sup>th</sup> Annual Bishops' Meet  
Theme: *Communication Challenges for Bishops' Conferences in Asia*  
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My brother Bishops, dear friends in Christ,

It is a great pleasure and honour for me to be here with you at this 13<sup>th</sup> annual Bishops' Meet, bringing together representatives of Church social communications commissions and offices from across Asia. I am very happy to be able to meet you and to learn more about your efforts to promote social communications in Asia. This is a providential occasion to share with and learn from one another. Over the past year and a half, since my appointment to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, I have had many opportunities to meet both in Rome and abroad people from all walks of life working in the rich and varied field of Church pastoral communication. It has been an extraordinary time of discovery for me as I am sure it will be here with you on my first visit to Asia as President of the Pontifical Council.

Once again, I would like to thank Father Eilers for inviting me. I would also like to express my appreciation for all that he has done over the years at the FABC-OSC in supporting and promoting in Asia the Church's work in social communications. The annual Bishops' Meet and the BISCOP training seminars have offered excellent opportunities for further education, sharing and networking. It is also heartening to see how such efforts have been possible despite the difficulties of meeting given the great travel distances and costs. The follow up to these meetings is also impressive, with the series of books which have been published by the FABC-OSC office and which I have found very informative. The topics covered are always timely and relevant to the concerns and pastoral work of the Church in Asia and, indeed, the entire Church.

I would also like to say that I am very happy to be back in Asia again. As some of you may already know, I have had the privilege of travelling to Asia on numerous occasions in the past, before taking up my current position. In the mid-1970s I was stationed in Manila, my

second posting in the diplomatic service of the Holy See. Subsequently, when I was working at the Secretariat of State as Undersecretary for Relations with States, I followed developments in Asia, including work on the first bilateral agreement between the Holy See and Vietnam. I have also followed questions concerning the Church in China. As a result, I am pleased to say that I have some privileged insights into this vast and varied continent, as well as an immense appreciation for the cultural and spiritual richness of the Church in Asia and its contribution to the universal Church. I have also been profoundly moved and inspired by the heroic witness of so many Church members struggling amidst situations of oppression or discrimination. At the same time, I have been impressed with the quiet yet powerful witness offered by Catholics, in less difficult contexts but often as a minority community, in promoting a dialogue of life in the multi-religious societies in which they live.

So, as you can gather, a good part of my background is in diplomacy for the Holy See. Therefore, you can imagine my surprise when a year and half ago I was informed by the Holy Father of my new assignment as president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. It is a very new area of specialization for me, although in my most recent position as Secretary of the Administration of the Patrimony of the Apostolic See I did oversee the work of the Holy See Internet Office which manages [www.vatican.va](http://www.vatican.va). At the same time, I knew that I would have to begin this new job by listening – a virtue in communication itself! The process started with meeting with individuals working in the area, ranging from bishops visiting Rome for meetings or *ad limina* visits to academics and practitioners in the field. All of them had their own experience and insights which have helped me immensely in appreciating the work done in this vast area of Church communication.

At the same time, I wanted to widen the consultation process from individual meetings to group gatherings, where a worldwide representation would be possible. The purpose was not only to enrich the Council's knowledge, but also to help bring together people active in the world of communication to exchange, network and continue the dialogue in different ways in the future. That is why the Council hosted two congresses this year in May and June. The first congress was for representatives of Schools and Departments of Social

Communications in Catholic Universities, while the second congress was addressed to those responsible for the direction and operation of Catholic Radio Stations. A particular objective of the Congresses was to give the Council a fuller understanding of the range of activities taking place in these institutions and a greater appreciation of the qualifications, talents and skills of those who work within them.

The Congress programs were designed to allow for the greatest possible degree of interaction among participants, enabling them to share information about the particular concentrations of their various activities and the specific challenges presented by the environments within which they operate. The Council hoped, moreover, that these exchanges, and the informal encounters that the Congress would foster, would lead to the formation of ongoing networks of professional support and solidarity in a Catholic Christian framework.

I know that many of you have already heard about these congresses from those of you here who attended them. I believe we had good representation and participation from Asia, and I am very pleased to know that Fr. Eilers is planning a possible BISCOM meeting next year as an Asian follow-up meeting to the first congress of schools and departments of social communications.

Regarding the feedback we received from the discussion groups in the first congress, it was clear that there was general agreement on the centrality of ethics both as an academic issue and as a formational concern. This linked with an emphasis on the importance of anthropology and it was felt that an approach to ethics coming from an anthropological perspective would also allow for the raising of fundamental questions of a religious nature. It was also generally agreed that a competent professional formation in the basic skills and technologies of communications was a *sine qua non* – Catholic universities would have to be at least as competent as other institutions in this area, if they were to command respect in the public forum.

The discussion groups at the second congress on Catholic radio highlighted a dominant concern on how to finance their existing activities and, perhaps, expand them. It is hoped

that this and other issues will be advanced at regional gatherings of Catholic radio stations as the challenges vary enormously in different contexts.

The Council was also satisfied that, in addition to meeting their formal objectives, the congresses served to promote a greater awareness among participants of what was happening in other institutions and in different contexts. It is clear that the congresses also facilitated a rich cross-fertilization of ideas and that connections were made that will produce much fruit in the short to medium term. The congresses also served to help the Council to identify individuals who are particularly qualified in terms of their academic formation and experience who may be in a position to support our work.

Next year, most likely in May, we will be hosting a third in the series of these congresses, but focusing on Catholic print media, its survival and transformation in a time of media convergence.

Another providential opportunity for me to learn more about Church communication efforts and concerns took place during the October assembly of the Synod of Bishops, focusing on the theme: *The Word of God in the Life and Mission of the Church*. As the head of a Vatican office, I had the opportunity to participate in the assembly. The subject of the Word of God and its promulgation through the means of social communication made it into the final list of propositions. Proposal 44 notes:

*The Synod underscores the importance of the means and languages of communication for evangelization. The proclamation of the Good News finds new outlets through modern communication characterized by intermediality.*

*The Church is called not only to spread the Word of God through the media, but also and above all to integrate the message of salvation with the new culture which has been created and enhanced by communication. ....*

*We recommend that we become more familiar with the means of communication, that we follow the rapid changes and invest more in communication through use of the various media available, including television, radio, newspapers and internet. They are all forms of communication which can facilitate the possibility of dutifully hearing the Word of God. It*

*is necessary to prepare devoted and competent Catholics in the field of social communication.*

The Synod proposition underscores the need for being up-to-date and involved in using the latest media in order to better disseminate the Word of God. At the same time, it underscores a need to prepare competent people to work in this area.

All of these meetings over the past year and half are leading me to articulate two key insights for the work of the Council in offering encouragement and support to the many social communication activities carried out by the Church and its members.

The first is the question of the new cultures in which we find ourselves which have been shaped by the astounding and rapid development of new communications technologies. At the recent Congress for Faculties of Communications in Catholic Universities, organized by our Council, I was very taken by some of the insights expressed by Professor Pier Cesare Rivoltella of the Catholic University of Milan. In his address, he noted how:

*“In a digital society like our own it is difficult to find any environment which is not already permeated by the media, and this fact will likely be a constant development trend in future years. This means that the media no longer constitute a particular interest, but have become the social and cultural space in which all our individual and group experiences are lived. In a sense, communication and the media are the fabric of our lives, new protagonists which cut across our daily activities. To study the media means even more to study our culture, how we live, and the anthropology of the modern world”*

The media really have become increasingly part of the fabric of society or like the air we breathe. It is important to look at where the trends are today and, especially, to get ahead of the curve and see where they will be tomorrow. Often, I think we tend to be too reactive in dealing with new developments in society. We should try to be more pro-active, looking at what is on the horizon, in order to be more ready, involved and capable of spreading the Gospel in the new cultural contexts and with the new languages created.

A number of trends can be identified today, which give an idea of where we are going. How quickly this is happening varies greatly from country to country. To mention just a few of these trends in brief, we are seeing:

- much more interactive and informal communication among people of all different backgrounds;
- a mass media becoming more of a personal media, where the consumer can decide what to watch, when and how;
- media consumers becoming media authors;
- challenges for truth and accuracy of sources and their authority;
- the convergence of the media – print-broadcast-internet-cellular phones;
- the creation of new media languages;
- a desire to be continually connected via the new media and to live in the present moment;
- less time for reflection and perhaps even a fear of silence;
- a need for media education which not only helps consumers be more discerning, but also more responsible as media authors;

Therefore, we cannot simply view the technologies as means, but we must begin to understand how they have transformed patterns of communication, of education and of socialization into a new digital culture. And it is not just a matter of mastering the technical competencies and of acquiring the necessary hardware, but of understanding the new mission field that has been produced by these technologies and their users. I would also like to stress the marvellous possibilities the new digital culture offers the Church in its mission of evangelization. We have to be there in order to accompany others searching for meaning on their journey in life, and in this way proclaim to them the Good News of Jesus. It is a call to service and to dialogue with the new culture in which we find ourselves.

For this reason, I believe that formation is a top priority and is essential for developing and laying a solid foundation for the Church's communications ministry. If we are to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ through our personal witness and our professional work in the media, we must have communicators who are properly formed in Christian values and

morals, who understand this new digital culture in which we live and who are not only professionally trained in communication techniques and technology.

While it is important that local churches continue to invest in appropriate technologies, it is ever more important that they invest in people. The technologies will continue to change, today's cutting edge computer is tomorrow's obsolete antique. What we need are people who are not mere technicians, but true professionals in the area of communication; people who can ensure that our Church moves with the times and adapts new technologies as they emerge and, ever more importantly, to the changes in the culture of communication that come with the technological developments.

I would like to see a pyramidal structure emerge where formation begins at the local level with appropriate courses for seminarians, catechists and pastoral leaders. At the regional level, we must build up and enhance the centres of excellence which can support the local work. Finally, we must identify regional experts who will benefit from a more professional and academic education at the international level. The Council is committed, in conjunction with other stakeholders such as CAMECO and Aid to the Church in Need, to developing the capacity to support appropriate candidates in pursuing advanced studies, especially at the doctoral level.

I think the Holy Father's choice for the 2009 theme for World Communications Day - *New Technologies, New Relationships: Promoting a Culture of Respect, Dialogue and Friendship*. - will offer a great opportunity to address these and other questions. I would also like to say that there is no doubt that your work here in Asia is on the forefront of these areas, given that most of you form a tiny minority in a multi-religious context, which requires sensitivity and creativity when communicating the Gospel as a service to all and in a way that furthers mutual understanding and respect.

The dual areas of the new culture of communication and formation are also the focus of the Council's work next year. In March we will be hosting an international Seminar on Social Communications for Bishops from Monday 9th to Friday 13th March 2009. The aim of the Seminar is to gather Bishops with appropriate expertise and pastoral experience from

around the world so that, together with the Council and invited academics and leaders from the communications sector, they can reflect on the trends that are emerging in communications, evaluate the present communicative capacity of the Church and begin to plan for the future. In May, as I noted earlier, we will be hosting a congress on Catholic print media in an era of media convergence. Finally, in the autumn, the Council will hold its first Plenary Assembly since my arrival. The reason we have not yet convened the plenary is precisely because we wanted to acquire a good knowledge of what is happening around the world and to widen this consultation even more so that the fruits of these meetings could be discussed at the first plenary meeting.

Those details sum up some of the concerns of the Pontifical Council and the efforts made thus far. I look forward to hearing more about your experience, concerns, hopes, and I welcome to hear of any suggestions you might like to offer.

Thank you and I take this opportunity to wish you all every grace and blessing.