



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 20th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Social Communications and the Christian Formation of Public Opinion"

[Sunday, 11 May 1986]

Dear brothers and sisters,

1. The recent Extraordinary Synod of Bishops, on the occasion of the twentieth anniversary of the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council, did not set out merely to be a solemn commemoration of that event, which was destined to mark so deeply the life of the Church in this century; more importantly, it brought the Council's spirit to life again and recalled anew its teachings and decisions. Thus, the Synod took the Second Vatican Council and relaunched it into the Church's life.

Among the initiatives given birth by a directive of the Council there is one which is worthy of special mention. It is the annual World Communications Day, established in the first place "to strengthen more effectively the various forms of the Church's apostolate in the field of communications in all the dioceses of the world" (*Inter Mirifica*, 18). The decision to establish it, which shows what great importance the Council Fathers attributed to social communications, is seen to have even greater relevance today, with the ever growing influence of the communications media.

The Church which, this year for the twentieth time, in faithful obedience to the Council, celebrates World Communications Day, has been accustomed to assign a particular theme to each successive celebration. This year, the "Day" is to be dedicated to considering, in depth, what contribution social communications can make to the Christian formation of public opinion.

This is not the first time that the Church has turned its attention to this theme. "The Church does not speak and listen to her own members alone", said the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*, in 1971; "her dialogue is with the whole world. By virtue of a divine command and by

the right to knowledge possessed by the people whose lot she shares on earth, the Church is in duty bound publicly to communicate her belief and her way of life" (n. 122).

2. Paul VI, in his turn, wrote in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*: "In our age which is characterized by the mass media, we must not fail to avail ourselves of the media for the first proclamation of the message, for catechetical instruction and for a deeper study of the faith. These, when they are employed in the service of the gospel, can disseminate the word of God over a vast area and carry the message of salvation to millions of men. The Church would feel herself guilty before God if she did not avail herself of those powerful instruments which human skill is constantly developing and perfecting. With their aid she may preach 'upon the housetops' the message which has been entrusted to her. In them she finds in a new and more effective form a platform or pulpit from which she may address the multitudes" (n. 45).

"Public opinion" consists in the common and collective way of thinking and feeling which is found in a fairly large social group at a particular time in a particular place. It is the indicator regarding what the body of the people think about a subject, or a fact, or a problem of some importance. Public opinion is formed by the fact that a large number of people do, because it seems to them right and proper, just what some persons or groups who have a certain cultural, scientific, or moral authority, think and say. This shows the grave responsibility borne by people who because of their education or prestige form public opinion or influence its formation in some measure. People, in fact, have a right to think and feel in conformity with what is true and right, because from their way of thinking and feeling depends their moral performance. It will be right if their way of thinking conforms to the truth.

It needs to be underlined, in this connection, that public opinion has a great influence on the modes of thinking, feeling and behaving of those who, either because of their youth or their lack of education, are not capable of making critical judgments. Thus, there are many who think and act according to what is commonly thought in the community, without being in a position to resist the pressure it imposes on them. It must also be emphasized that public opinion exercises a powerful influence on the formation of laws. In fact, there is no doubt that the introduction in some countries of unjust laws, such as, for instance, legalized abortion, must be attributed to the pressure exercised by a public opinion which was favourable to the measure.

3. From this arises the importance of forming a morally healthy public opinion on matters which more closely affect the well-being of humanity in our time. Among these we would place the values of life, of the family, of peace, of justice, and of solidarity among peoples.

It is necessary that a public opinion should be formed which is sensitive to the absolute value of human life, so that it shall be recognized in all its stages, from conception to death, and in all its forms, even those marked by sickness or disability, physical or spiritual, as having this value. A materialistic and hedonistic mentality is in fact spreading, according to which life is worth living

only when it is healthy, young and beautiful.

It is necessary that a correct public opinion should be formed on the family, a public opinion which will help to overcome some ways of thinking and of feeling which are not in conformity with the plan of God who has established the family indissoluble and productive. Unfortunately, a public opinion is becoming widespread favouring free love, divorce and the drastic reduction of births, by any and every means; this needs to be rectified because it is injurious to the true good of humanity, which will enjoy true happiness to the exact extent that the family is united and in a healthy state.

Then, it is necessary to create a public opinion of constantly growing strength in favor of peace, and of what serves to bring it about and preserve it, such as reciprocal appreciation and mutual agreement among peoples; the rejection of every form of racial discrimination and exaggerated nationalism; the recognitions of the rights and just aspirations of peoples; disarmament, first of the spirit and then of the instruments of destruction; the effort to achieve the peaceful resolution of conflicts. It is clear that only a strong public opinion favorable to peace can put a stop to such as are tempted to see in war the way to resolve tensions and conflicts.

"State leaders rely to a large extent", states the pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, "on public opinion and public attitudes. Their peace-making efforts will be in vain, as long as men are divided and warring among themselves through hostility, contempt and distrust, as well as through racial hatred and uncompromising hostilities. Hence, there is a very urgent need of re-education and a new orientation of public opinion" (n. 82).

Finally, there is need for the formation of a strong public opinion in favour of the solution of the very distressing problems of social justice, of hunger and underdevelopment. What is required, in fact, is that these problems should be better known today in their tremendous reality and gravity, so that a strong and very widespread public opinion in favour of finding solutions to them shall be created. It is only under the vigorous and unrelenting pressure of such public opinion that the responsible politicians and economists of the rich countries will be induced to help the developing countries.

4. It is specially urgent that a healthy public opinion shall be formed in the area of morality and religion. To block the wider spread of a mentality favourable to moral permissiveness and religious indifference, there is need to form a public opinion which respects and appreciates moral and religious values for the reason that they make a person fully "human" and give life its full meaning. The danger of nihilism, that is, of the loss of the values which are most properly human, moral and religious, hangs over humanity today like a grave threat.

A correct public opinion, then, ought to be formed regarding the nature, mission and work of the Church, which is seen by many today as a simply human structure, and not as what it really is, a

mysterious reality that incarnates the love of God in history and brings the love and the grace of Christ to humanity.

5. In the world of today as it is, the instruments of social communications in their many forms - press, cinema, radio, television - are the principal makers of public opinion. Great, then, is the moral responsibility of all those who have these instruments in their employ, or who are the guiding forces behind them. The media of social communications ought to be put at the service of humanity, and therefore of truth and goodness which constitute humanity's most important and necessary values. Those, therefore, who work professionally in the field of social communications should feel themselves under obligation to form and to make widespread a public opinion which conforms with truth and goodness.

In this task Christians are expected to distinguish themselves, knowing well that in contributing to the formation of a public opinion favorable to justice, peace, fraternity, and religious and moral values, they are contributing in no small way to the growth of God's Kingdom, which is a kingdom of justice, of truth and of peace. From the Christian message which is directed to the well-being and the salvation of humanity, they can draw inspiration to assist their brothers in forming opinions that are right and sound, because they are in conformity with the plan of love and salvation for humankind which God has revealed and put into action in Jesus Christ. In fact, the Christian faith and teaching of the Church, precisely because they are founded on Christ, the way, the truth and the life, are light and strength for humanity in his passage through history.

I conclude this message with a special blessing for all those who work in social communications with a Christian spirit of service to the truth and promotion of moral and religious values. I assure them of my prayers, and I wish to encourage them in this work, which calls for courage and consistency, and which is a service to truth and to freedom. It is, in fact, the truth that makes people free (cf. Jn 8:32). And therefore, to work for the formation of a public opinion which is in conformity with the truth is to work for the growth of freedom.

From the Vatican, 24 January 1986, the Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.

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