

Towards a Cultural Reflection on Language and Communication

Some ideas to shape the reflections for the next Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Culture
A discussion document intended to stimulate debate and launch a process of consultation

“The Good News which is Christ’s Gospel for all men and the whole human person, ‘both child and parent of the culture in which they are immersed’ (*Fides et Ratio*, 71), reaches them in their own culture, which absorbs their manner of living the faith and is in turn gradually shaped by it” (*Towards a Pastoral Approach to Culture*, 1). Our Plenary Assembly focuses on two areas of contemporary cultures, their use of *language* and *communication*, to evaluate the current situation and then propose lines of action for the Church’s evangelising mission.

A Look at the Horizon

After centuries of oral culture and the emergence and spread of written culture, television and now internet have become the major influence on the cultures in which the moral and human formation of Christians takes place. Together with the newness, there is also continuity: stories continue to be told, books, journals, magazines, radios and televisions continue to have audiences, but **the newness of the internet age is effecting a cultural shift**, as digitalisation panders evermore to the desires of the consumer and transforms mentalities, thought-patterns and lifestyles. This is as true for outlying villages in remote parts of the world as it is for seminarians in Rome, for let us not forget that more than a billion people now have access to the internet and with the development of internet on mobile phones, in five years this number will double.

The new culture, shaped and transformed by the mass media, offers great possibility for the transmission of the faith. But in an age where we are used to skimming through newspapers, documents and books, and flicking through countless television channels, and surfing the internet, the art of in-depth reading and listening is being lost. **Distraction, disturbance and disruption** are the new key words. Attention spans appear to be getting shorter. Indeed some reports state that youngsters – who still seek objective truth – are no longer capable of watching an entire television programme, preferring the shorter clips on Youtube and the interactive experience of social networking sites. Many homilists are aware of the listening abilities of their assemblies and the need to pay attention to the dynamics of listening curves and new ways of expressing ideas.

There is too the issue of simplification as **symbols** – so necessary to capture the imagination – **are decoded** into different cultural milieus, as there exists also the problem of the ignorance of semiotics. The experience of dialogue with atheism shows us how the distorted interpretation of symbolic and historical issues is the source of religious indifference, the matrix of the new atheism. Indeed in our “copy-and-paste culture”, expressions such as sanctifying grace, mortal sin, or salvation have either fallen out of use or no longer have the same impact they once did.

The timing of today’s culture is that of both rapid response and continual flow of news stories. Whether it is consensual or conflictual, interest is raised by stories aware that even bad publicity is publicity. The **immediacy of the world press** is known to all and religion is one of the most appealing themes for news stories, but the Church’s voice is not always correctly received. Meanwhile, what is happening at the local level is often overlooked.

Vehicularising the Good News in this Cultural Context

The Church has a long tradition of **using diverse linguistic forms**: in the Bible alone, stories - both historical and symbolic-, exhortations, legislations, professions of faith, poetry, confessions, prayers and hymns were used to express and transmit the faith. To engage with people today these and other languages can be used, particularly those that are interactive, figurative, narrative, clear and simple. What we have received we try to transmit in a language our contemporaries can understand, for, as St Matthew teaches, “No one lights a lamp to put it under a

tub; they put it on the lamp-stand where it shines for everyone in the house. In the same way your light must shine in the sight of me, so that, seeing your good works, they may give the praise to your Father in heaven” (*Mt* 5, 15-16). Cfr. also *Mt* 10, 27 “What I say to you in the dark, tell in the daylight; what you hear in whispers proclaim from the housetops.”

Even if it they are overused, the words of Marshall McLuhan still hold true: “the medium is the message”. Although faith and culture are substantially diverse realities, in a certain sense we can say that the meeting between **faith and culture is an interactive meeting**. Interactivity is a collaborative exercise which creates community, respect and reciprocity, so that our communication strategy is not an end unto itself but supposes the involvement of several parties. This raises the question as to whether there is there such a thing as “our language”, and, if so, what needs to be done to translate it into “their language”. Alas the language of faith is sometimes unknown, or at least unfamiliar to our contemporaries. So we need to ensure that our necessary clerical training does not create a false gap from popular culture – where the people are at – and that the secular age does not become a secularist age, excluding the religious. Here the importance of listening and discernment are paramount, and also the confidence to paraphrase McLuhan and say that our message is more than the media.

Much of society follows the fallacies of an exterior-centred approach where spin dominates truth. Criticising that stance, there is also a need to pay attention to how we are seen, and so the **need to enter into the mentality and linguistic models in current use**. Behaviour which may once have been normative, may today appear arrogant, improper, boastful or impertinent, so that, discerning new expectations and new standards, we can render more visible the excellent work being done in the apostolate throughout the world, particularly in schools and hospitals.

Ours is an **image-centred culture**. Hence we can look to the Church’s artistic traditions, which have transmitted and shaped the patrimony of our faith, raising the question also as to how the contemporary arts continue catechetical mystagogy with regard to continuity and transition to new thought patterns.

Pedagogical techniques have developed over time, putting interactive learning before magisterial lectures as a means of education. Such methods involve the person, making them participants and protagonists of evangelisation. The new phenomena of cyberspace (chat, blogs and comments, social networking sites such as “Facebook” and “Second Life”) spread the **network of sharing and participation** even wider, to involve multi-partners. And they do so with new languages, with the use of avatars, by photo sharing, and now twittering – where prosumers “speak of themselves” with the typical brevity of the text speech used on telephones. The Church’s communications strategy can never be limited to internal matters (*ad intra*), but also looks to the external (*ad extra*). The experience of the Catholic blogosphere is aware of this need to avoid the risk of a new ghettoisation.

There is a desire for dialogue, particularly intimate dialogue which appears almost perversely on the front pages of newspapers and chat shows, where the ego-centredness of reality television is typical. Much of what appears in chat rooms and on social networking sites would be more suitable for the confessional, which shows the **need for real relationships** respondent to the dynamics of participation in an authentic Christian community. It also shows the need both for the education of the media and of a Christian presence on the web able to spread virtue-nurturing techniques and behaviour in this digital age and thus offer space for research, encounter, growth, prayer and silence in our non-stop noisy world.