



LECTURES & PAPERS

THOMAS F. DAILEY, O.S.F.S., S.T.D.

Director - Salesian Center for Faith & Culture

John Paul II's Legacy of Social Communications

presentation for a special symposium marking the
25th anniversary of the pontificate of John Paul II,
sponsored by the Salesian Center for Faith & Culture
at DeSales University on 18 October 2003

INTRODUCTION

In the realm of social communications, we find a link between two great teachers in the Church: John Paul II, whose 25-year anniversary of papal election we celebrate, and Francis de Sales, who is not only the patron of journalists and writers, but also the patron of our university.

Though preceding him by a few centuries, Francis de Sales has apparently made a strong impression on our Holy Father. During his apostolic journey to France in 1986, John Paul II preached in our saint's town of Annecy, during which he had this to say about our patron:

Among the saints who have carried the evangelical message to their contemporaries ... Francis de Sales belongs to those who have known how to use a marvelously adapted language. We would say today that he was a man of communication. In his letters and in his books, he holds (one's) attention with a style that makes his spiritual experience clear while showing at the same time his profound understanding of people.¹

More recently, on the 400th anniversary of the episcopal ordination of Francis de Sales, John Paul II wrote a letter to the present bishop of Annecy in which he appreciates the saint's inspiration:

¹ Homily, 7 October 1986.

Advisor of popes and princes, endowed with great spiritual, pastoral and diplomatic qualities, Francis de Sales was a man of unity in a period when divisions created a wound in the Church's side. ...; he showed that all are called to live an intense spiritual life, whatever their situation and profession,

The pope also expresses his own admiration for our saint:

Still today, and I am very glad of it, the works of Francis de Sales are part of our classical literature; it is the sign that his teaching as a priest and bishop finds an echo in the human heart and has an affinity with the deepest human aspirations.²

This respect and recognition underscore the Church's present practice of publishing the message for the World Day of Social Communications each year on the feast day of St. Francis de Sales.³ That connection -- between the saint and the pope -- is what I intend to explore, with a liberal dose of quotations from the world day messages and related papal addresses.

This paper will focus on two aspects of the worldwide celebration. First, I will review the Church's current emphasis on social communications in the context of what John Paul II has called the "new evangelization." Second, I will draw out two key themes from the papal texts in terms of a Christian anthropology, to support my contention that these messages, when taken together, constitute a sort of "mini-treatise" on the pope's understanding of human being and culture. Weaving a comparison to Francis de Sales through both parts, I will conclude with what may be a daring suggestion!

SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

The only worldwide celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council,⁴ the World Day of Social Communications is

a way of acknowledging with gratitude a specific gift of God, a gift which has enormous significance for the period of human history in which we are living, the gift of all those technical means which facilitate, enhance and enrich communications between human beings. (XXVI)

That gift appears in many forms:

in the press, in written and audio-visual information programmes, in cinematographic creations, in data banks and telematic exchanges, in theatrical communication and stage shows and high level cultural presentations, in public opinion debate and in commentaries on the news, in services which educate

² Letter to Bishop Ives Boivineau of Annecy, 23 November 2002.

³ Usually the theme is announced in the Fall of the preceding year. The text is published in connection with the memorial of St. Francis de Sales (January 24). The "day" itself is celebrated on the Sunday before Pentecost.

⁴ See the decree *Inter Mirifica* (1963) and the pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio*.

public thinking, in all the productions of group media, through animated drawings and quality cartoon strips, in all the varied forms in which written literature is distributed, in audio- and video- recordings, in the moments of relaxation with music on local or network radio! (XXIII, 7)⁵

No matter the medium, the gift of our new means of communication comes with the challenge to make these technological tools more than merely “lifeless instruments”:

The means of social communication are indeed the new "Areopagus" of today's world - a great forum which, at its best, makes possible the exchange of truthful information, constructive ideas and sound values, and so creates community. This in turn challenges the Church in her approach to communications not only to use the media to spread the Gospel but actually to integrate the Gospel message into the 'new culture' created by modern communications, with their "new languages, new techniques and a new psychology" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37). (XXXII, 5)

To meet this challenge, the Church enters headlong into the new forum of communications, which, like the Roman one of old, has become

that public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the social life of the city took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display. It was a crowded and bustling urban space, which both reflected the surrounding culture and created a culture of its own. (XXXVI, 2)⁶

The Church interacts with the culture of communications in two ways. On the one hand, the *influential power* of modern means of communication – its ability to shape modes of thinking and feeling and behaving – demands that moral considerations be brought to bear on what is being communicated.

In the world of today as it is, the instruments of social communication 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. (XX, 5)

⁵ Recognizing the variety, several messages for this annual celebration have focused on specific media: the press and radio (II), television (II & XXVIII), computers (XXIV), audio & video productions (XXVII), movies (XXIX), and, most recently, the Internet (XXXVI).

⁶ cf. XXXVI, 2: “This is no less true of cyberspace, which is as it were a new frontier opening up at the beginning of this new millennium. Like the new frontiers of other times, this one too is full of the interplay of danger and promise, and not without the sense of adventure which marked other great periods of change. For the Church the new world of cyberspace is a summons to the great adventure of using its potential to proclaim the Gospel message.”

Yet these values are not always evident. Instead, communications take place in

a field where cultural and financial pressures can sometimes blur the moral vision which should guide all human realities and relationships (plenary 1999),

where

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,

and where

public opinion exercises a powerful influence on the formation of laws. (XX, 2)

On the other hand, the *expansive power* of modern means of communication requires that the Church take advantage of technological advances to proclaim the message of salvation in Christ. After all,

Christians have a "good news" to tell. We have Christ's message - and it is our joy to share it with every man and woman of good will who is prepared to listen. (XXVI)

Of course, this proclamation is the Church's essential mission, which takes place today in a radically different world:

The advent of the information society is a real cultural revolution ... where facts and ideas and values are constantly being exchanged. Through the media, people come into contact with other people and events, and form their opinions about the world they live in - indeed, form their understanding of the meaning of life. For many, the experience of living is to a great extent an experience of the media. The proclamation of Christ must be part of this experience. (XXXIV)

And we know that this experience today has a truly global dimension:

In all cultures and at all times - certainly in the midst of today's global transformations - people ask the same basic questions about the meaning of life: Who am I? Where have I come from and where am I going? Why is there evil? What is there after this life?(cf. *Fides et Ratio*, 1). And in every age the Church offers the one ultimately satisfying answer to the deepest questions of the human heart - Jesus Christ himself, "who fully reveals man to himself and brings to light his high calling" (*Gaudium et spes*, 22). Therefore, the voice of Christians can never fall silent, for the Lord has entrusted to us the word of salvation for which every human heart longs. (XXXV, 2).

That evangelical voice, that salvific word, comes to be heard or read or seen through various means. Consequently,

Christians cannot possibly ignore the world of social communications. Indeed, media of every kind can play an essential role in direct evangelization and in bringing to people the truths and values which support and enhance human dignity. The Church's presence in the media is in fact an important aspect of the inculturation of the Gospel demanded by the new evangelization to which the Holy Spirit is summoning the Church throughout the world. (XXXV, 4)

ST. FRANCIS DE SALES – MISSION TO THE CHABLAIS

Long ago and far away, that same Spirit moved Francis de Sales to make a new contribution to the world of communications and thereby foster evangelization.⁷

The year was 1594-95; the place what is now Switzerland. A young Francis, having been ordained a priest less than a year, was sent on a mission to the Chablais region, which had been under the almost total control of the Calvinists. Despite the harshness of winter in the French Alps, Francis journeyed forth each day from his shelter to speak with the people of the village of Thonon in an effort to convince them of the truth of the Catholic faith.

Not only was the weather against him, so was the government. On October 2, 1594, the councilmen of Thonon promulgated a ruling that any citizen who listened to the preaching of the young provost would be sternly punished. Francis' response was ingenuous. In a letter to the council on January 25th (1595), he announced a novel plan:

“Gentlemen, I have been preaching the word of God for some time now in your city. Your people can hear me only seldom and then only partly and in secret. For my part, in order not to overlook anything, I have seen to it that some of the more important fundamentals (of our teaching) have been written down, fundamentals that I had chosen as the main theme of my sermons and talks in defense of the faith of the Church.”

Then, over the course of a year, Francis printed some 85 pamphlets on disputed theological questions. These he posted in public areas and distributed under house doors, so that the people could read them on their own terms and in the safety of their homes. Interest in his teaching grew steadily, and people increasingly ignored the order of the Council so as to attend his sermons. Over time, Francis' pamphleteering enjoyed great success. As the Duke of Savoy noted in a letter to the papal nuncio in October of 1598, after Francis de Sales' missionary activity, in all of the Chablais there no longer existed any village or hamlet that had not been re-converted to the Catholic faith.

⁷ See the series of commentaries written by Herbert Winklehner, OSFS in *Das Licht* <www.franz-sales-verlag.de/>.

Despite the differing historical circumstances,⁸ the decisive intervention by Francis de Sales in his world of communications discloses what our Holy Father sees today as the extended power of the media.

Then as now, the purpose of adopting new forms of communication was to reach more and more people. For Francis, this meant taking his message to the people of the villages, since they would not come out to hear him. For John Paul II,

To reach the man of today, heavily conditioned by these [modern] means [of communication], making oneself heard, understood, [and] accepted ... constitutes a new pastoral problem of how to utilize precisely these very means. (plenary 81)

Then as now, the larger objective of social communications is to affect, even transform, common thinking. For Francis, this meant using printed pamphlets as a way of overcoming a “dissension of wills in matters of religion” that he considered to be “the principal and sovereign scandal of the world.”⁹ In our time,

It has been said that newspaper columns, radio microphones and television cameras constitute a pulpit from which modern society draws much of its moral and spiritual orientation. If that is true, it is essential that the Church should not only participate in the formulation of the public philosophy which will represent the shared values of contemporary society, but that she should also be directly present in this new pulpit with her own newspapers and magazines, her own radio and television stations and programmes, her own voice of truth and love. (plenary-86, 5)

Then as now, the effect of using new means of communication is to enable and foster social interaction. For Francis that meant engaging the people of town and village, who responded by coming to hear him preach and by their subsequent abjuration. In our day, John Paul II reminds us that

By providing accurate information and a forum for the exchange of views, the media can also further the dialogue and participation that are essential for democratic life and social development. (plenary 90, 2)

Finally, then as now, the ultimate goal of communications is to contribute to the progress of humanity and to the spreading of the Kingdom of God. In Francis’ day, when political conflicts were rife with religious undercurrents, presenting and defending the truth of the faith had significant social consequences and was infinitely more important “than simply engaging in ostentatious rhetoric. And ... he went beyond tearing down, as he worked to rebuild the edifice

⁸ In Francis’ time, communication between Catholic thought and culture met with opposition. In our day, Catholic thought, or any religious position, is more often marginalized, and religious silence prevails.

⁹ *The Catholic Controversy*, p. 7.

of faith that had been possessed by the Catholic ancestors of these peasants of the Chablais three generations before.”¹⁰ In our day, John Paul II recognizes that

communications technology can help to break down barriers and create new bonds of community and new kinds of opportunity in a world where human solidarity is the essential way forward. ... Not only must the preaching of the Gospel be inculturated in the world of social communications, but in and through that world it must be incarnated in the variety of cultures, ancient and modern, to which a door is being opened by the modern media. (plenary 98, 2-3)

In sum, what St. Francis de Sales tapped into with his apologetic pamphlets – and in an even more popular way with his *Introduction to the Devout Life* -- is the “culture” of his time and place. And an awareness of culture – with its particular and mutual connection to communications – may well be John Paul II’s distinctive and lasting contribution to our understanding of human life.

CHRISTIAN ANTHROPOLOGY

An exposition of the anthropological teaching permeates the pope’s various messages for the World Day of Social Communications. There he speaks of the influence of the media, both positive and negative, on infants (79), youth (80), women (96), and especially the family (80, 94, 04). Likewise does he recognize the power of modern communications to promote or impede human freedom (81), peace and justice (83, 87), solidarity and fraternity (88), and ultimately the unity and progress of all peoples (91). In sum, John Paul II highlights the potential of modern media to bring about a cultural transformation – within persons and among peoples. In this pope’s view,

Culture, faith and communication are three realities among which a relationship is established on which depend the present and the future of our civilization, which is called to express itself ever more fully in its planetary dimension. (XVIII, 1)

For our purposes in this university forum, let us consider broadly two poles on the pope’s humanistic continuum. At one end are young people. For university-age students, and even those of younger years, contemporary means of communication exercise a significant, indeed determinative, educational role that should cause all of us to take notice:

In place of a culture laid down upon a value-content framework, on the quality of the information, there ... enters a culture of the temporary which favours the rejection of long term commitments, a culture so overpowering that it induces a flight from the making of free personal choices. For a training directed towards encouraging the growth of a sense of responsibility, both individual and collective, there is substituted an attitude of passive acceptance towards the fashions and needs imposed by a materialism which, while stimulating consumption of goods, empties the conscience. The imagination, which is the

¹⁰ *The Catholic Controversy*, p. lvi.

very property of our early years, the expression of youth's creativity, of its impulsive generosity, dries up in the glut of images absorbed so effortlessly, and a habit of indolence is formed which ... and smothers any impulse to undertake new tasks or projects. (XIX, 4)

Ironically, the use of imagination is one aspect of St. Francis de Sales' speaking and writing that has brought him great renown in terms of his ability to communicate well.

From the *Introduction to the Devout Life*, whose popular piety is reflected through imaginative examples, to the *Treatise on the Love of God*, whose systematic reflection is developed from the starting point of beauty, the corpus of Salesian writings contains so many images (33,000 by one scholar's count!) that he can be considered the literary champion of the imagination among all French authors of his time.¹¹

For St. Francis de Sales, the imagination has "an inestimable efficacy to enlighten the mind and move the will."¹² Its use has as its goal not merely fascination but attention, not simply considering but focusing, in a new and creative way. Would that we might restore in young people a good and wholesome imagination, with its power to engender an openness toward, and a response to, the presence of God as it is manifested in human life.

Unfortunately that divine presence is clouded in our age by tragic events on the world scene, and this brings us to the other pole of John Paul's humanistic continuum. How difficult it is to see a loving God when human relations in our world are so profoundly colored by the scourge of terrorism. John Paul II confesses that this phenomenon, and its eventual extinction, is a particular concern of his pontificate.

In the new context of "tragic circumstances ... darkening the world scene," he directs us to see that this contemporary manifestation of evil has "undermined its (humanity's) confidence" and led to a radical change of perspective. Because we are no longer able to escape threatening situations, he says, our human hearts have become "anxious and distressed." We live now in a "climate of widespread anxiety." We are faced with "persistent flashpoints of cruel conflict" that can overwhelm us in "new and disconcerting" ways. As a result, we feel especially vulnerable. Then, when fear comes to dominate daily life, people tend to close themselves off from one another in a climate of mistrust, thereby increasing their temptation to despair. And thus begins to turn the vicious circle of hatred, attack, recrimination, and reprisal.¹³

Unfortunately, this vicious cycle continues; both terrorism and peace have fluctuated greatly in the pope's 25-year reign. Nevertheless, he remains confident, as should we, that when the means of social communications engender a total dialogue among persons and institutions of every

¹¹ Cf. H. Lemaire, *Étude des images littéraires de François de Sales* (Paris: A.-G. Nizet, 1969), pp. 15-22.

¹² *On the Preacher and Preaching*, p. 50.

¹³ For a more complete treatment of this theme, see my paper for the C.S. Lewis faculty forum, on "John Paul II and the Challenge of Evil in the World" <<http://www4.desales.edu/SCFC/Studies/JP2-Evil.htm>>.

culture, media information can contribute to personal formation in truth and goodness and beauty. It is then, and perhaps only then, that our world can undertake the passage “from a balance of (apprehension and fear and) terror to a strategy of trust ... as the fulfillment of justice in view of peace” (XXI).

CONCLUSION

In this symposium, we celebrate John Paul II for his 25 years of communicating to us and to the world the message that we can and should “be not afraid!” His pontificate embodies the belief that

If the truth is liberating and if the Good News of Jesus Christ is both saving and uplifting, then the means of communication can truly be an expression of human aspiration and an incentive to Christian hope. (plenary 1985)

We remember St. Francis de Sales in this context of social communications as one whose oratorical eloquence and literary excellence led not only to his being named patron of journalists and writers, but also to his being declared a Doctor of the Church.

Considering that this last title is given only to those of eminent doctrine and distinguished sanctity, let me conclude by suggesting, as I dare here to do, that the most fitting tribute for this pope and the most beneficial message for all of us would be for his successor to declare John Paul II the next Doctor of the Church.
