The Church and Communication

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[Abstract] The Church is called and sent to continue God's Trinitarian communication in Revelation and Incarnation into the here and now of all times and places. This Church is born in the communicating act of God's Holy Spirit on Pentecost. The Church community became a group of messengers of God's revelation to the whole world. Through the Church God's revelation and Jesus Christ's incarnation are to further unfold under the guidance of the Holy Spirit into the "*koinonia*" and "*diaconia*" of the faithful as a living experience and witness of the Word or the communication of God today. Therefore, communication is essential to the Church. Enlightened with this theological aspect of the Church and Communication, this paper aims to reflect on a deeper meaning of communication, not only as social media but more as a basic principle for theology. Communication is more than the expression of ideas and the indication of emotions; at its most profound level, it is the "giving of self in love," as it is defined by the life of the "Perfect Communicator," Jesus Christ. This study will also demonstrate a historical development of the Church's approach toward social media so as to discover how the Church dealt with various communication ministries in the past. Through historical facts and documentary provisions in Church communications documents and messages, the researcher looks forward to formulating some guidelines on how to deal with the challenges in social communications ministry specifically through social media at present.

Introduction: Communication

Communication has always been a fundamental aspect of human life. Throughout history, from the time of creation to the present, humans have engaged in communication. Communication has evolved alongside human history, especially in the last century with the advent of modern communication technologies. It has not only influenced the way people connect with themselves and others but also the way they live. Communication shapes human identity, culture, and faith.

Franz-Josef Eilers, a prominent theologian in communication studies, defines communication as an integral part of everyday life.[1] He notes that communication has become a significant and applicable term in various fields of study. In the sciences, it is crucial for engineering, information technology, network and data processing. In the humanities, communication draws from classical approaches in rhetoric, history, and philosophy. In the social sciences, it builds on insights from anthropology, sociology, psychology, and cultural studies. In business and marketing, communication focuses on mass and broadcast media like television, radio, and print.[2]

Traditionally, communication has been viewed as a linear process of transmitting information from a sender to a receiver. However, Eilers argues for a more enriched view of communication as a dynamic and ongoing dialogue among individuals. Communication is not just an interaction between a sender and a receiver, but a complex process influenced by various factors such as culture, context, and background.[3] It involves the sharing and interpretation of signs and meanings, both verbal and non-verbal, among individuals. Communication forms a common ground and gives rise to culture, belief, and society. In the Christian understanding, communication is *communio* or "communion," which leads to the formation of a community.[4] Communication is thus an essential aspect of human existence rooted in God's self-communication and the creation of humanity in God's image.

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[1] Franz-Josef Eilers, SVD, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication* (Manila: Logos Divine Word Publications, 1994), 2.

[2] Anh Vu Ta and Franz-Josef Eilers, *Social Communication in Theological Perspective: Communication Theology* (Manila: Logos Divine Word Publications, 2015).

[3] Eilers, *Communicating in Community,* 22.

[4] Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 19.

Communication and Theology

Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini, a biblical scholar and former Archbishop of Milan, explores God's self-communication through the depiction of the Holy Trinity in a painting by Masaccio.[5] The painting portrays the Father holding the wooden cross, symbolizing His offering of His Son out of infinite love. The crucified Son willingly submits to the Father's will and becomes an offering for all humanity. The Holy Spirit, represented by a dove, signifies the communication between the Father and the Son, unifying humanity with the Trinitarian life. Humanity, represented by the Blessed Virgin Mary and John the Beloved, receives this divine self-gift.[6]

According to Martini, the painting captures the supreme act of divine communication, wherein the reciprocal love and offering among the three persons of the Trinity overflow as a gift to humanity. The hidden life of the Trinity is characterized by unceasing communication and communion. God, being communication Himself, wills to share His divine life with humanity. God's communication to humanity is not only a revelation but a self-communication. The culmination of this communication is found in the incarnation of the Son and His paschal mystery.[7] Jesus, the Word made flesh and the "Perfect Communicator," communicates the Trinity to the world through His life. His personal communication, both verbal and non-verbal, exemplifies the complete giving of self in love. Through His passion, death, and sacrifice on the cross, Jesus embodies true communication. The Church, established through the imparting of the Holy Spirit after Jesus' ascension, continues God's divine communication in the world. The Church's mission is to incarnate Christ by integrating communication into everything she does. As humans created in God's image and likeness, we bear the mark of the Triune God in our ability and need to connect and relate to ourselves, others, and respond to God's communication.

Communication in Church History

In the Bible, the Acts of the Apostles provides a detailed account of the life of the early Church. Inspired by their firsthand experience of living with Jesus and witnessing his paschal mystery, as well as driven by the fire of the Spirit, the early Christian

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5   Carlo Maria Martini, *Communicating Christ to the World,* trans. Thomas M. Lucas, S.J. (Diliman: Claretian Publications, 1994), 27
6   Carlo Maria Martini, *Communicating Christ to the World*, 28.
7   Carlo Maria Martini, *Communicating Christ to the World*, 28-29.

community strove to follow the teachings of the faith. They exemplified how Christian communities should live and communicate. One notable characteristic of the early Christian communities was their deep connection to the Holy Spirit. They dedicated time to prayer and remained open to the guidance of the Holy Spirit in their personal lives (Acts 1:15-26) and in fulfilling their mission (Acts 10:44-48). Communication played a central role in shaping their relationship with God and with one another. They utilized various channels of communication available to them, using their voices and language to deliver speeches that affirmed one another (Acts 2:14), settled disputes (Acts 15), testified to their faith in the face of persecution (Acts 6), and shared the Gospel (Acts 13:44-47). They also wrote and exchanged letters to maintain connection and foster relationships. The Apostle Paul employed this form of communication to shepherd the different Christian communities. In addition to verbal communication, the early Church performed rituals to commemorate Jesus. They broke bread and prayed together (Acts 2:42), anointed disciples for mission (Acts 13:2) and embraced a communal lifestyle by sharing their possessions with one another. Their daily lives, both as individuals and as a community, became a true testament to the Gospel of Christ.

This profound connection between the Church and communication continued to evolve over time. In the 4th century, with the baptism of the Roman Empire into Christianity, the Church became the center of Roman culture. Alongside the development of oral and written traditions, the life of the Church thrived. The Church exerted a significant influence on art, architecture, and literature, including the production and preservation of books in Roman temples. [8] When these books were transferred to monasteries, it became a special commitment of the monks and religious to preserve, develop, and produce books of various kinds. Emperor Theodoric's chancellor, Cassiodorus (485-500 AD), and St. Benedict (529 AD), among others, established rules to guide the monks in their role of studying and copying these books, ensuring that spiritual guidance could reach the faithful despite time and distance. [9] Inside the monasteries, monks created, copied, and illuminated books by hand in dedicated rooms called "*scriptoria*," which in Latin means "place for writing." This process involved scribes in copying the textual content and illustrators or artists in painting images and adding elaborate decorations.[10] It is said that through the Church's effort to preserve not only religious books but also books on various subjects, the teachings of early

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[8]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community,* 219.
[9]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 66.
[10]   "The Medieval Scciptorium," The J. Paul Getty Museum, accessed April 23, 2022. https://www.getty.edu/art/exhibitions/scriptorium/#:~:text=Scriptorium%20s%20a%20Latin %20word,made%20each%20book%by%hand

philosophers were passed down. Pope Gregory the Great, in his book of Pastoral Rule (c. 590-591), included concepts that can be applied to pastoral work. They emphasize the importance of adapting to the needs of audience members to care for them effectively.[11]

During the late medieval period, the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg in 1450 revolutionized the production and distribution of books, greatly enhancing their speed and availability. While different forms of printing had been discovered previously in China (846 BC through wooden plates) and India (200 BC, mainly for ornamental purposes), Gutenberg's movable type system had a transformative impact on European printing. Eilers notes that the Church initially overlooked the impact of the printing press, in contrast to Martin Luther and other Protestant reformers who early on fully embraced the new invention. This move greatly aided the Reformation movement in 1517, as it allowed for the production of compact-sized books, including the Bible. It also introduced a new format of printing known as "flying sheets" or flyers, which Eilers identifies as the beginning of what he calls the "periodical press." As more people gained access to this new technology, the Catholic Church, and also Henry VIII adopted cautious stances in relation to the printing press. The King of England demanded that a royal license be obtained prior to any printing activity, while the Church, on the other hand, issued the "*Index Librorum Prohibitorum*" or the "List of Prohibited Books," which banned certain books containing erroneous doctrines that posed threats to the faith.

With the establishment of the Propaganda Congregation, however, a more positive view of the printing press emerged in relation to the Church's mission work. Through the advocacy of the congregation, the Church initiated its own printing press in 1626.[12] Pierre Babin's research, as cited by Eilers, highlights how printing helped safeguard a "uniformity of knowledge" to ensure the accurate transmission of Catholic doctrinal teachings. The evolving political developments of the modern era also influenced the Church's relationship with communication. The multiple revolutions in France (1789, July 1830, February 1848) and across Europe engendered hostility towards the Church, partly due to the antagonistic stance of the press toward the Church and the clergy. Consequently, the Church became wary of the press. In response to what it considered "bad press," the Church established its own newspaper in 1861, called *L'Osservatore Romano*, to defend the Pope and the Church. Additionally, religious groups across Europe took initiatives to establish Church-focused printed materials such as newspapers and periodicals.[13] Overall, from the late medieval/early- modern period to the 19th

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[11]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 219-220
[12]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 67-69.
[13]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 221.

century, the Church displayed reluctance in fully embracing new means of communication. In an effort to protect the faithful, the Church adopted a defensive stance, cautiously adapting to new communication inventions for its mission. Of course, the political environment also influenced the Church's relationship with communication and shaped its perception of the press, which was the predominant mode of communication during that time. To maintain its defensive position, the Church created and disseminated its own communication materials.

The 20th century witnessed the development of communication means such as film, radio broadcasting, and television, commonly referred to as mass media. It was during this time that the Church, under the papacies of Pius XI and Pius XII, exhibited a more open and constructive attitude towards communication. Eilers, in his survey of various Church documents issued by the popes throughout the 20th century, including decrees, encyclicals, pastoral instructions, and addresses, observed this shift in the Church's "official thinking or thinking in the field" of communication.[14]

Communication Documents of the Church

Vigilante Cura ("Vigilant Eye") – Written by Pope Pius XI in 1936, it is the first papal document in the 20th century solely dedicated to the topic of communication. It is inspired mainly by the success of the "Catholic Legion of Decency," a group formed by the faithful in the United States to oppose immoral motion pictures. Membership in the Legion required the non-patronage of any cinema or film deemed to be against the standards of Catholic moral teachings. With the encyclical, Pius XI sought to promote the movement on a bigger scale through establishment of cinema offices and the proposal of a world-wide ratings system for films. Recognizing the capacity of film to capture the imagination of viewers, as well as impact mind and soul, the document considers film to be more influential than the press. For this reason, the Pope cautioned the faithful to remain mindful and critical of motion pictures.[15]

Miranda Prorsus ("Remarkable Invention") – This encyclical was issued in 1957 by Pope Pius XII. The document does not reference the press but treats three other media, namely, cinema, radio and television. Eilers suggests that *Miranda Prorsus* should be read in connection with the Pope's other 60 addresses that tackle different considerations in communication. The number of speeches focused on communication, Eilers notes,

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[14]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 222-223.
[15]   Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 223-224.

express the Pope's special interest in the field. This is also evident in the affirmative approach of *Miranda Prorsus* in its discussion of electronic media. It presents an analysis of their significant potential effects and pastoral implications while underscoring the moral duty this entailed of safeguarding the truth.[16]

Inter Mirifica ("Among the Wonderful") – This is the first conciliar document on communication ever released by the Church in its 2000-year history. Issued by the Second Vatican Council in 1963 as the Decree on Social Communications, the draft document received criticisms regarding its quality and was reduced considerably to 24 paragraphs from its initial 114; however, its approval can still be considered a decisive moment for the Church, since the document coins the term "social communication."[17] It thus shows the Church's broader concern for communication, encompassing all the popular expressions of the time, such as "media of diffusion" or "mass media." Eilers explains that social communication is the "communication of and in human society" that "includes all ways and means of communication."[18] Thus, social communication not only refers to mass media, but to the whole range of human communication within society. Other highlights of the document include the need to focus on truth in using the means of social communication. It also proposes the establishment of a World Day of Communications to be celebrated yearly to remind the faithful of the Church's concern in the area of communication. The decree goes on to require a pastoral instruction, to be released in collaboration with experts in the field, that would ensure application of the conciliar principles. The decree also endorses the formation of the faithful and clergy in communication and calls for the official institution of the Pontifical Commission for the Means of Social Communication.

Communio et Progressio ("Unity and Advancement") – Following the requirement of the Council Fathers in *Inter Mirifica,* this pastoral instruction was released in 1971 to emphasize that the "chief aim" of communication is the "unity and advancement of men." It opens with a discussion of the Christian perspective of communication and cites social communication as a way to contribute to human progress and unity. It names Jesus as the "Perfect Communicator," who restores man's ability to connect to God and others through his incarnation, passion, death, and resurrection. The document addresses formation of seminarians and religious groups as well as the need for further research in

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[16] Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 224-226.
[17] Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 226-228.
[18] Ta and Eilers, "Social Communication in Theological Perspective," 7.

communication. It also tackles in great detail the commitment and responsibilities of the Catholic faithful for evangelical communication.[19]

Aetatis Novae ("The Dawn of a New Era") – Issued by the Pontifical Council for Social Communications on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of *Communio et Progressio*, *Aetatis Novae* presents some pastoral concerns of the time that affect communications, such as the cultural-social and political-economic milieus. It discusses in detail how the media can truly be at the service of humanity by exploring different aspects of human life, including cultural engagement, the new evangelization, etc. It also offers challenges, such as the call for critical evaluation, formation of the faithful, and equal access to information and modes of communication. A unique aspect of the document is found in its appendix, which details the "Elements of Pastoral Planning.[20]

Rapid Development – Written in 2005 as Pope John Paul II's final document, "Rapid Development" was intended to celebrate the 40th year of *Inter Mirifica* by consolidating the pope's various reflections on communication from the previous documents. John Paul II invited the Church not only to utilize the means of social communication, but also to "integrate" the Gospel into the "new culture" formed by these means. As the development of technology had altered the way people live, thus also affecting culture and beliefs, John Paul II calls the Church to proclaim the message of Jesus in a manner meaningful to the people of today. The pope also reminds the faithful "not to be afraid" of emerging technologies but to consider them as marvels of God through which the Church might make the Gospel known. He also encourages communicators not to be afraid of experiencing opposition in their mission since Jesus has already "conquered the world" (John 16: 33). Lastly, the pope counsels the Church not to fear her own weakness since Jesus is present among us always.[21]

These documents demonstrate the Church's evolving understanding and engagement of communication throughout the 20th century. From initially cautious and defensive approaches to embracing and utilizing various media forms, the Church has recognized the importance of communication in fulfilling its mission of evangelization and engagement with the modern world. It has thus acknowledged the potential of media to spread the Gospel and to educate and inspire. The need for responsible and discerning use, always with ethical considerations, has been a highlight of the Church's rapidly changing landscape of communication.

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[19] Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 229-231.
[20] Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 232-233.
[21] Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 234.

The Church and Communication Today

With the Church's recognition in recent years of the growing influence of social media platforms and their impact on society, Pope Francis, in particular, has emphasized the importance of using such media as tools for dialogue, encounter, and evangelization. He has encouraged Catholics to engage actively in digital spaces, promoting a culture of encounter and respect while at the same time sharing the message of the Gospel (World Communication Day Message, 2019). The Church has also acknowledged the need to address the negative aspects of social media, such as the spread of misinformation, cyberbullying, and the creation of echo chambers that reinforce divisions and polarization. It has called for responsible digital citizenship, urging individuals to cultivate virtues of patience, empathy, and critical thinking while navigating the online world.

Furthermore, the Church has recognized the power of storytelling and visual media in conveying its message. It has embraced the use of film, documentaries, and other visual arts as means of evangelization and promoting social justice. Through these media, the Church aims to touch hearts, inspire reflection, and create awareness about pressing issues affecting humanity.

Another significant development in the Church's engagement with media is the rise of online streaming and virtual platforms for religious services and events. Especially during times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, digital technologies have enabled the faithful to participate remotely in Masses, devotional prayers, and other religious gatherings. While recognizing the limitations of virtual experiences, the Church has seen value in leveraging technology to foster a sense of community and ensure the spiritual well-being of its members.

Conclusion

Communication is an essential aspect of human existence and plays a significant role in shaping human identity, culture, and faith. The Church, recognizing the importance of communication, has engaged with various forms of media throughout history to fulfill its mission of spreading the Gospel and promoting social justice. From the early Christian communities' use of oral and written traditions to the invention of the printing press, the advent of mass media, and the dawn of digital age, the Church has adapted and evolved in its approach to communication. The Church's engagement with

media has been guided by a desire to proclaim the Good News, educate, foster dialogue, and promote values that align with its teachings.

Throughout history, the Church has acknowledged both the positive and negative aspects of media. It has recognized the power of media to influence society, shape public opinion, and impact individuals. At the same time, it has remained vigilant about the potential risks and challenges that come with media consumption, such as distortion of truth, erosion of moral values, and trivialization of culture. The Church's documents on social communications have provided guidance to the faithful, emphasizing the need for responsible and discerning use of media. They have called for the promotion of authentic human communication, respect for human dignity, and the safeguarding of moral values in the media landscape. These documents have also encouraged the Church to engage actively with media as a means of evangelization and cultural dialogue.

In the present digital age, the Church faces new opportunities and challenges. The rapid development of technology, including the internet, has transformed the way people communicate, access information, and engage with one another. The Church has recognized the potential of digital media for reaching a wider audience, fostering global networking, and facilitating dialogue. However, it has also called for caution in navigating the digital realm, promoting responsible online behavior, and addressing the ethical implications of digital communication.

In conclusion, the Catholic Church has a rich history of engaging with various forms of media throughout the centuries. From oral traditions to print media, from radio and television to the internet and social media, the Church has adapted to the changing media landscape while remaining faithful to its core mission. The Church's documents on social communications provide a framework for the responsible and discerning use of media, emphasizing the importance of promoting truth, human dignity, and the values of the Gospel. By embracing the potential of media while remaining vigilant about its challenges, the Church seeks to communicate its message effectively and engage with the modern world in a spirit of dialogue and love.

【摘要】教會被召叫和受差遣，繼續天主的啟示和道成肉身中三位一體進入此時此地的通傳。教會是在天主聖神五旬節的溝通動作中誕生的。教會團體成為一群向全世界傳達天主啟示的使者。天主的啟示和耶穌基督的道成肉身透過教會，在聖神的引領下，進一步在信眾的「共融」（koinonia）和「服務」（diakonia）中揭示，作為對聖言或天主的通傳活生生的經歷和見證。因此，傳播對教會來說至關重要。受教會與傳播這一神學方面的啟發，本文旨在反思傳播的更深層含義，不僅作為社交媒體，而且更多地作為神學的基本原理。通傳不只是思想的表達和情感的顯示；在其最深刻的層面上，它是「在愛中奉獻自我」，正如耶穌基督這位「完美傳播者」的生命所定義的那樣。這項研究也將展示教會對待社交媒體的歷史發展，從而發現教會過去如何處理各種傳播事工。透過教會傳播文件和文告中的歷史事實和文獻規定，作者期待教會當局制定一些指導方針，去應對目前社會傳播事工中，特別是透過現有的社交媒體事工所面臨的挑戰。並會就中國教會及其社交媒體如何應對這一挑戰，特別是中國對線上宗教活動實施更嚴格法規之下，作案例研究。

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