

A synthesis of the texts sent as a contribution for the Plenary Assembly on the themes of language and communication

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1. The terms language, communication and culture

- a) **Language** : whole of universal symbols that transmit abstract ideas and a vision of reality. All languages share certain common proprieties (structures, use of arbitrary symbols ...). CHOMSKY speaks of a “universal grammar”.
- b) **Linguistic determinism** : we are unable to think about things for which we have no linguistic categories. Language determines thought (SAPIR et WHORF). Today, this thesis has been set aside and scholars speak of *linguistic influence*.
- c) **Frames of reference** : to communicate you need to understand the context of life and thought of your interlocutor.
- d) **Civilisation/Culture** : civilisation, adopting a stance looking outward can give us reference to the notion of universality, progress and materiality. Culture makes reference to the particular, tradition and the spiritual.

2. Language and communication in globalised and secularised societies

- a) **A new cultural context**: to better treat the question of language and communication and a “new strategy” of evangelisation, we need to understand the cultural context in which they evolve. The information technology revolution from television to Internet has given birth to a new global language and **new values**. The **rapidity** of these new means of communication echoes the reigns of **efficacy** and of **immediacy**.
- b) **Postmodernity, a time of dreams**: the technical capabilities of the New Techniques of Information and Communication (NTIC) have made the quantity of communication explode, with a detrimental effect on their quality. This deterioration of interpersonal communication is due to a strong individualisation of societies, who assert the right to choose and access free choice and close cyber-surfers within their own virtual world. The importance of free choice, theorised by the *lumières*, believes without authority, tradition or nature.
- c) **A climate of confusion**: communication or access to information, now possible with the NTIC, as well as the number of people involved, makes room for an enormous amount of **interpretation**, in a general climate of confusion.

- d) **A secularised world** : religion is relegated to the **private** sphere. The **moral reference of the Church**, which shaped the daily life and schemes of thought, struggles in a largely secularised modern society. This secular world no longer speaks the same language as the Church.
- e) **Science**: universal understanding of man and of his universe is today proposed by **science**, and its partner **technology**, with the technological advances that have changed our way of living and thinking. *Net language* is often considered as the only authentic one. Moreover, these new foundations for the science world lead to an unreal and inhuman road. A language and a scientific method, which compartmentalise and divide into specialisation, are opposed to a global, homogenous and coherent Christian life.
- f) **The multicultural dimension** of societies and exchanges is multiplied by this strong ability of NTIC to remove the **distance** between people. But this pluralism, now inevitable, leads towards a confused **relativism**, notably in the political and moral debates. Now it is a lack of meaning, of truth (inability to reply to the question “Why am I alive?”) which is in part responsible for this crisis of communication and more deeply of culture. Multicultural exchanges, tied to a deregulation of markets and an economic concentration, accelerate the **sterile homogenisation** of cultures.
- g) **Positive contributions** : globalisation of the means of communication favours a great **collaboration** between different peoples and cultures. For example, in the domain of scientific research. **Anonymity**, a characteristic of Internet communication, can encourage users to express themselves more freely. The new media, such as **Facebook**, are precious means of communication for marginalised or oppressed people. Finally this globalisation contributes to a humanising desire for connection, necessary for **intercultural dialogue**. We could respond to the risks of cultural homogenisation through the NTIC that these same NTIC, thanks to their decentralised character, could challenge the laws of massive diffusion of the classical media and so preserve **cultural diversity**.

3. The NTIC and cultural changes

- a) **Consequences on our ways of thinking, “*We are how we read*”**: the reduction of time for daily reading and the appearance of the practice of skimming (reading in diagonal) and zapping (some speak of *homo zappiens*) favours a general lowering of our ability to concentrate, contemplate and interpret. In our copy-and-paste culture we assimilate many facts without actually carrying out a proper reflection. The lowering of a critical spirit is reflected in simple erudition. The diversity of interlocutors often, all opinions being put on the same level, render distinction between truth and opinion difficult.
- b) **A new tool, new symbolic systems**: the technological revolution of the Internet and other NTIC introduce elements such as rapidity, access over documentation, facility of research, low cost of communication and access to information, the abolition of distances – this has permitted great advance in the areas of distance learning and e-medicine while forging new values of a new cyber-culture.
- c) **The dissolution of traditional barriers :**
- a. The notions of time and space
 - b. The real and the illusory
 - c. The content and the message. Today, as Marshall McLuhan has analysed “*the medium is the message*”, in a system where form is as important as content.
- d) **Immediate Dangers:**
- a. **anonymity** which relieves interlocutors of their responsibility and accountability for their input and poses the question of addiction, especially expressed in the need to “live” in a virtual world
 - b. **credibility and traceability** of information, in a system which works in a network and where each person becomes a source of information.
 - c. **deformation of language** : with “*Txt speak*” (series of abbreviations where phonetics takes over from former standards) due to the speed of writing demanded by these NTIC, such as in online discussions and chat.
 - d. **Loss of the notion of truth at the heart of communication**, which is not a simple exchange of information but engages

listening skills and respect to understand the interlocutor and unite people.

- e. **Development of a culture of banality** and of superficiality in which we are unable to get to the heart of the matter.

4. Means of Communication

- a) **Internet** : asides what has been pointed out above (rapidity, abolition of distances), Internet and television respond to great technological progress of real-time communication.
 - d. **YouTube** : virtual areopagus.
 - e. **Google** : research instrument that posits a sort of “**Tylorism of the spirit**”. Need to note that researchers of Google lead their advanced research in the field of artificial intelligence. Moreover, Google and social networks (Facebook, Twitter) are precious tools for those carrying out targeted publicity.
 - f. **The SNS** : *social networking sites*, the most famous being Facebook and MySpace, which allow for **virtual communities**.
 - g. **Web 1.0 and Web 2.0** : Web 1.0 included simple transmission of data through a digital form with html pages. Web 2.0 is about sharing data. The surfer is no longer a spectator but also an actor.
- b) **Television** : as with the Internet revolution, the television revolution has changed the way we think and do things. While in many western countries efforts to communicate and inform are concentrated on the Internet the importance of television should not be ignored, nor too video cassettes and cable channels which still interest more elderly population and/or those who have no access to Internet infrastructure.
- c) **Cinema** : remains a tool able to **tell a story** in depth, capturing attention without fragmentation in a world of rapid and distracted communication. Cinema responds then to this human need to have a history to understand the depth of life. Cinema also offers different points of view. This diversity is necessary to construct a **dialogue** towards **truth**.
- d) **Tools that shape culture** : We speak today of a “**civilisation of image**”, some underline a transformation of *homo sapiens* into *homo videns*. This habit of receiving information by image lowers our ability to concentrate and understand. Images, which leave little to the imagination, destroy our

ability to conceptualise and think in abstract terms, which are necessities for reflection. In this cyber-culture, digitalisation of products, interactivity, the culture of networks give a new meaning to the relation between **creators, distributors and consumers**, with a notable diminution of intermediaries and costs. In the context of cultural products it is now possible to spread them on the web to have at the same time participation and diffusion across a wider scale.

5. Media

- a) **Content and form** : A quick point on the media seems necessary in a world fascinated more by the form than by the content of their messages. The media are not only passive channels of information but adapt to the market of supply and demand, including the needs of advertisers.
- b) **Actors in the debates** : the mass media and the news channels anticipate discussions and decision, often before the official declarations and texts are made available. Members of the public, when they trust entirely these media, may think they have followed the debates closely, even if they have not personally read the official declarations.
- c) **Four priorities for the media** : **objectivity** of information, **visibility**, **transparency**, **immediacy**. Information must above all be entertaining and so some speak of “*infotainment*”.
- d) **Theological awareness of the media**: if we look at the specific case of the relation between Church and the mass media, we need to note the theological illiteracy of some journalists, polarised by the sensational and the immediate.

6. The Youth

The risks : some risks arise when internet is abused. Some online games – such as *Second Life* – or online social networks encourage the youth to take masked identities, anonymous and ambiguous, reducing their capacity to distinguish reality from virtual world, limiting the possibility of a true, responsible and sincere dialogue: a dialogue that is “**face to face**”. Internet, in abolishing the distances and enclosing the youth in a virtual world, can lead to a once impossible phenomenon: the youth are often more in touch with their peers

in other countries than with their own families, creating a real **emotional distance**.

7. Inequality and Internet Access

- a) **Obstacles to Internet access** : poverty, illiteracy, political censure, lack of infrastructure (notably power), lack of equipment (hardware and software), lack of skills, lack of motivation (no awareness of the advantages that come from Internet), technological dependence by the countries of the South on the countries of the North.
- b) **Affected areas** : Africa. A North-South divide is clearly visible as well as a town-country divide.
- c) **Necessity to reduce the information divide**: the classical means of communicating, such as books, reviews, oratory with preaching, or audiovisual material, and links between Church, School and Family should not be underestimated in the Church's communications strategy. The Church should not isolate itself by using a strategy exclusively centred on the NTIC. The Church must live the informatics revolution in building up a true mediatic culture that is more equitable, ethical and sustainable.

8. Challenges and Obstacles to be Overcome

- a) **Modern society, new tower of Babel** : In a context of plurality of cultures and religions, belonging to a multitude of spheres with different values systems and interlocutors, language becomes confused and ambivalent.
- b) **Explosion of spheres of belonging and break up of faith and culture**
 - a. **Saturation of the "self"** (Richard SENNET) : subjected to an enormous amount of media stimulations, in our culture of "over-information", strong images and immediacy, we face a paradox: we feel at once informed and uninformed. The self is **dispersed and incoherent**.
 - b. **Fracture between Christian life and the life of the modern citizen**: religious education has its work cut out in a world focused on technology. There is a need to learn how to live in a Christian manner in a world which is not Christian. The Christian is thus "bicultural". How to transform the world rather than see the world transform us?

- c. **Breakdown between faith and culture:** “do not accept the divorce between faith and culture” (John Paul II).
 - d. **Some issues:** How to make space for silence and contemplation? How to make space for the eternal in a world of the instantaneous? How to make space for the spirit of community? How to put man at the centre of the values of communication and information? How to transmit a message in an already saturated space? How to transmit Christian imagination in societies with a different global representation of the world of history, of man and of God?
- c) **The eternal obstacles:** the Church needs to face the old thorny issues such as illegal conversion, persecution, indifferentism, relativism, where the weight of history and the memory of the missions of evangelisation of the past.

9. The link between the NTIC and evangelisation

- a) **Internet, a multifaceted tool:** interactivity permits rapid and direct exchange, virtual participation is now possible on a wide scale, while forums and online discussions permit the provision of **online advice**. Internet, with the possibility of effecting questionnaires and enquiries online allows for greater **feedback** on the different actions and programmes being carried out. Without forgetting that Internet, which abolishes distances, can be a great tool for the diffusion of universal Christian humanism.
- b) **Faith and cyber-culture :** a strong link already exists between faith and culture. Christianity can use Internet to **inform**, share **experience**, create **cohesion** with a greater number.

10. Action Plan, proposals : “an optimistic vision of electronic evangelisation”

- a) **Interpersonal communication and Christian values**
 - a. **Rethink oration :** Need to strengthen links between listening and sharing. Reinforce face-to-face dialogue (e.g. the tradition of priests visiting families in the parish).
 - b. **Encourage dialogue and listening:** do not forget that “truth is found in friendship” (John Paul II). Listen in order to better discern the needs of

each person and respond in a climate of trust. Remind the general public that the Church is there for them.

- c. **The Church as “home of the word” towards a pedagogy of dialogue:** communication is not a simple exchange of information and data, but consolidates the relationships between people and creates communion between them. In a world that is evermore multicultural, dialogue must treat rigorously the themes of **identity**, **otherness** and **diversity**. The difference is not an obstacle but a richness that must be exploited in considering notably the importance of listening and silence. A **formation to listen** is needed. It involves the valorisation of the availability to listen (decentring the self) and the faculty of putting aside one’s own prejudices (which are formed when the norms of a group or of a person become the sole criteria to approach and judge the other). Nevertheless, dialogue with the other should not result in the denial of one’s own identity or in an excess of **relativism**. A **natural affinity** is not necessary for a constructive dialogue. Formation of a community that doesn’t see the other as a means to reach an end is the necessary basis for dialogue. Catholicism, while evolving in a multi-religious context, has an important role to play, notably through the example of charity. A strict deontology of dialogue where the other is the ethical foundation and supports a hermeneutic of difference is a useful tool.
- d. **Limit intermediaries**, especially the mass media, and favour direct access to information so that each person can make his/her own opinion on public life.
- e. **Fight against anonymity** to revitalise public life.
- f. **Semantics influences our conception of reality:** re-establish the words “reality”, “gift of self”, “love”, “human development” or “respect”, knowing that communication is sterile without these concepts. The Church should not reduce the richness of her language.
- g. **Catechesis** : reinforce catechesis and the sacraments to develop personal faith, lived experience anchored in daily life which cannot easily be transmitted by the Internet. Insist on a good formation of catechists to avoid “spiritual homelessness”. The importance of the homily. Reinforce “pre-catechesis”.

h. Creation of a school of evangelisation which encourages the openness of the spirit and dialogue in dispensing with a formation in communication.

b) Formation of experts, development of research and useful informatics

a. Research in the domain of NTIC : the development of research in communication science and a significant investment in these areas are necessary to:

- Anticipate the technological evolution and its cultural impact
- Provide a response apt to these and to face competition for attention on the Web
- Anticipate tendencies rather than follow them.

A system of sharing know-how to educate people for a good use of new technologies. All in raising the efficacy of existing sites.

b. Open an Internet centre for Catholic culture: this centre would have as its objective popularising Catholic culture with its interactive technology.

c. Websites are useful for developing the meaning of values and avoiding letting Internet become a place of individualisation and isolation.

d. Sites must respond to two criteria for public use : For practicing Catholics, these sites must relay practical information (e.g. mass times) and offer a rubric of questions-answers to accompany their spiritual life. The sites must also make the Gospel known and use NTIC to propose a “new theology of image”.

c) Interactivity

a. Managing interactivity in communication material and information. The Church is accustomed to announcing its message as a simple emitter. With interactivity, the Church becomes at the same time emitter and receiver. This new type of immediate dialogue (blog, e-mails, online video...) needs the creation of competent and reactive teams.

b. Don't be reduced to the simple digital reproduction of written documents. “A world more disposed to listen to witnesses than teachers”.

d) Simplicity and sincerity

- a. **Importance of the tone used** : be humble and realist. Speak with calm and avoid seeming to be authoritarian.
- b. **The target** :
 - i. **A wide ranging problem, between the universal and the particular** : while seeking to strengthen links between cultures, old traditions and new evolutions, and spreading a universal message, the Church has to speak to each person in their daily reality.
 - ii. **The Media** : avoid giving as primary material technical texts, but place accent on the essential in a simple language to avoid misinterpretations and counter-sense.
 - iii. **Adapt the means to the target** : what is the best way to reach a given public. Use of different languages, for one size doesn't fit all.
 - iv. **Two levels of communication**: distinguish two levels of communication. An internal level, at the heart of the Church and an external level, between the Church and the society that surrounds her.
 - v. **Know how to enter the game another way**: when a message doesn't get across, it is more likely the fault of the emitter than of the receiver. When transmission fails, there is no point just shouting louder, we need to think of another way of communicating, taking into account the characteristics of those we wish to reach.
- c. **Find a new language** with input from authors, artists and Catholic intellectuals.
- e) **The place of art** : the Church must strengthen non-verbal communication, especially in an image culture, notably in the areas of the arts and cinema.
- f) **Technique and spirituality**
 - a. The solution is not purely technical. Technical means can never replace human contact.
 - b. Resolving problems of communication will not be achieved by the development of new programmes or projects but depends on **the interest and vocation of people** who carry them out, with competence and passion.

- g) **Is regulation necessary?**
- a. **Yes** : surfers need tools, for example, labels, to be able to recognise the official character of a site that is “*Church sanctioned*”.
 - b. **No** : new initiatives could be impeded by the mechanisms of control.
- h) **The role of the local Churches**
- a. Evangelisation must take into account the **cultural differences**. Local Churches must be left to respond to this crisis of communication in reinterpreting their own symbolic system, using their own local traditions, philosophies and cultures.
 - b. For some, there is a need to address the issue of the **administrative structure** of the Church which is based on western, Greco-roman mode, that can not be adapted to current changes. Solutions do not come only from the centre to respond to diverse local needs.
 - c. **Constant vigilance** of cultural changes.
 - d. Evangelisation is also the work of the **missionaries** – personal meetings, efficacious communication, passion and competence – which to reach out to different cultures learn not only the grammar of languages but also the history of peoples and their symbols. This learning can only be done through a life near to the people.
- i) **Virtual Catholic Universities:** the creation of virtual universities is a good way for the Church to position herself on the Web while strengthening the links between the North and the South and fighting against the digital divide.
- j) **Combating the commercial logic of the NTIC and the notion of lay progress**
- a. Research tools and networks follow commercial logic and leave little place to the truth, e.g. Google where truth is not a criterion but investment of clients who pay to be more visible.
 - b. **Cathoogle** : this research tool, as opposed to the commercial logic of Google, is too little known and its clearly displayed Catholic position attracts negative opinion.
 - c. The Church needs to oppose the myth of lay progress according to which modernity and religion can only develop in terms that are inversely proportionate.

- k) **Give importance to imagination** : here it is a question of understanding that the heart is not touched through reason as much as through imagination. Theologians need to reach people through their imagination. If we analyse cultic and sacramental languages, we find they are poetic and symbolic.
- l) **Take into account the particularity of the Christian message in a pluralist world**
- a. Communicating in the Christian world does not mean transmitting an information but **sharing a living reality** (*Il Risorto*).
 - b. Remember the declaration of Benedict XVI who considers communication not as informative but as performative. Language is structure according to a project of life.
 - c. We live in a **plurality** of morality which is expressed through a multitude of languages, a true Tower of Babel, where the Church must strengthen the link between faith and culture.
 - d. **In a world of digitalisation**, the Church is a wide reaching human institution, of non-virtual discussion. The Christian message must be fraternal and put above all else respect for others and interpersonal relationships.
 - e. **The problem of the interpretation of the Christian message**: interpretation is a significant part of communication. But Christian messages are delivered now in a secular ocean, where the languages and ethical frameworks once used are changed. How can we invent other ways of communicating in accordance with Christian values? The message is now the means and uses a secular culture. For knowing that these means have as sole message the glorification of technique, well-being and success, what steps can be taken to transmit a message that is in part in contrast with the means?

11. Recapitulation of the issues

- How to transform the world rather than be transformed by it?
- How to make space for silence and contemplation?
- How to make space for the eternal in an instantaneous world?
- How to make space for community spirit?

- How to put man at the centre of values of communication and information?
- How to transmit a message in a saturated space?
- How to transmit Christian image in societies with a global view of the world, of history, of man, and of a different God?
- How to invent other modes of communication in agreement with Christian values?
- The message is now the means, and uses a secular culture, knowing that these means have as sole message the glorification of technique, well-being and success, what steps can be taken to transmit a message that is in part in contrast with the means?