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The World at a Round Table:
Catholic Media Work in a Digital Age

In public discussion of the Society of St. Pius X during the past several weeks, the thrust has often been that Catholic Church must stand up for the reforms of the Second Vatican Council. At times, though, the plea has seemed more of a protective shield, or a kind of 'clean bill of health' for persons not familiar with the specifics of the texts issued by the Council itself, let alone the background of these texts. I am pleased that a side effect of what has been the most unfortunate debate imaginable is a renewed interest in the Council, its pronouncements and its principal concerns.

Incontestably, one of the most important changes the Council accomplished is a re-orientation of Catholic media work. The *aggiornamento*, the opening vis-à-vis the world – the chief leitmotif of the Vaticanum II, also meant a new opening to the media world as set forth particularly in the Council Decree 'Inter Mirifica' (1963). The 40-year anniversary of the establishment of the Catholic Media Council (CAMECO) offers us a welcome opportunity to look back upon the principal concerns of the Second Vatican Council. After all, when CAMECO was created, the atmosphere was one of a re-orientation of Catholic involvement in the media. Today, looking back upon the success story of CAMECO, a success story four decades long, we are also looking back upon the inspirations for media work, inspirations issuing from the Council itself.

The positive basic approach towards the media as outlined already by Pope Pius XII in the encyclical 'Miranda Prorsus' (1957), and then elaborated upon in 'Inter Mirifica', was presented in detail in 1971 in the Pastoral Instruction 'Communio et Progressio'. There, it is written that '[t]he Church sees these media as "gifts of God" which, in accordance with His providential design, unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with His plan for their salvation.' Community and progress are the highest aims of media communication; service to mankind and an orientation toward the common good are the measure by which social communication is to be judged. What is remarkable is that even 'Communio et Progressio' sees no national boundaries and takes a global point of view instead. The contribution of world-wide communication is elucidated with the metaphor of the 'round table':

The modern media of social communication offer men of today a great round table. At this they are able to participate in a world-wide exchange in search of brotherhood and cooperation. It is not surprising that this should be so, for the media are at the disposal of all and are channels for that very dialogue which they themselves stimulate. The torrent of information and opinion pouring through these channels makes every man a partner in the business of the human race. This interchange creates the proper conditions for that mutual and sympathetic understanding which leads to universal progress. (Art. 19)

If the media are so vital to social development, and to human progress in history generally, then what is important to make use of the media of communication available to all – particularly to those

not yet able to share in these developments. The Catholic Church is called upon to establish contributive justice in regard to the media as well. 'Communio et Progressio' expressly identifies assistance to developing countries as a fundamental mission:

Those forms of aid which emerging nations need to develop their own means of social communication are of great importance among the many forms of international effort which the media demand. The lack of proper means of social communication is, in fact, a sign of slow development in a community, as well as being one of the causes of it. Without the use of modern techniques of social communication no country can provide its citizens with necessary information or proper education. This inability endangers political, social and economic progress. (Art. 92)

Aid is not to be confined to the provision of the necessary technologies but must also include training of media professionals. It must be so, it is argued, because the responsibilities of wealthier countries 'for the common good do not end at their national frontiers. They extend to the whole of mankind.' (Art. 93)

CAMECO was founded before 'Communio et Progressio' was published. Still, it is shaped by the same spirit of responsibility emphasised in the post-Conciliar document. CAMECO is a highly regarded institution that for 40 years has performed, and continues to perform, valuable work in promoting media work in Africa, Asia and Latin America – and, since 1993, for Central and Eastern Europe and the states of the former Soviet Union as well. The anniversary we are commemorating today is a fitting opportunity to thank all those who have worked, and who continue to work, to ensure consultation of continued high quality.

When speaking about Catholic media work in Germany, the focus is usually upon organisations such as the Institute for the Advancement of Future Journalists [*Institut zur Förderung des publizistischen Nachwuchses (ifp)*], The Catholic News Agency [*Katholische Nachrichtenagentur (KNA)*], or upon publications such the weekly *Rheinischer Merkur*. If CAMECO is mentioned at all, it is only in passing. Perhaps this is because the fruits of the labour of CAMECO are not visible here in Germany but only in the countries in which CAMECO is active. We should all realize, though, that the services that CAMECO performs also have relevance for us here in Germany.

The assistance we are able to provide is more than the funds for technical equipment and consulting in questions of strategy or training; we also provide concepts that promote an understanding of the media and of the activities of the Church in this area. The German Bishops' Conference is currently involved in a period of in-depth reflection about the future of the media involvement of the Church. We devoted a day of study to examining the current developments in the media landscape and identifying preliminary parameters for the future. Our efforts were guided by the question of what the Catholic Church can do to improve its media presence in the digital world.

There have been profound changes in the media work of the Church since the decade of Vatican II. When the authors of 'Communio et Progressio' articulated a vision of the round table, the image of the ways in which the media could bring people together was largely shaped by the model of television. There had already been world-wide live broadcasts of major events that gathered people in front of their television screens all over the world. The trend that was only beginning to emerge at the time has now progressed considerably and through the creation of countless stations and programmes, and thanks to the creation of the Internet, the trend has intensified almost infinitely.

Today, in the age of digital media, we have an entirely different notion of the ways media can promote linkages between people. In contrast to the landscape at the time of the Council, or even in the early 1970s, what we see today is a world-wide network that offers infinite possibilities for communication. Communication is no longer a uni-directional activity issuing from a privileged transmitter to a mass public of mere receivers; it is now a two-way street. Today, every receiver of a message can also issue a reply, disseminating messages and becoming a 'transmitter' in his or her own right. Thanks to computers and ever-smaller, multi-functional mobile terminals, people all around the world can join in a media-based dialogue. In the wake of the audio cassette, and later the video cassette, digital storage media have made programmes immensely more available, regardless of their original broadcast time. The round table to which 'Communio et Progressio' called us has grown a great deal larger as more and more communicators take their seats around it.

Another key feature of the modern-day media world is the dominance of visual imagery. This 'iconic turn' describes a cultural development that has thrust visual communication increasingly into the foreground, at the expense of the spoken or written word. This, too, was a development already under way in the age of television, but the trend has advanced dramatically in recent years. Live broadcasts with world-wide appeal are no longer limited to major sporting events such as the Olympic Games, or to acts of state and royal weddings. This form of immediate participation in events also has great significance for the Church. Pope John Paul II recognized and used the power of the media when he placed images that went around the world – both during his extensive travels, and throughout the deeply moving process of his death, in which a world-wide congregation of mourners, as it were, could take part.

This inundation with visual communication has not rendered the traditional media obsolete. The Internet is a platform that can make multimedia or audio files available just as easily as texts. The experts inform us that a key word for the future is 'cross-mediality', i.e. strategic control of information transmission by means of a variety of inter-networked channels. Traditional media such as newspapers, radio and television have created their own Internet presentations, offering interlinked print, audio and video files that can be called up at will. Internet links do not just take users to other websites; they also refer to other forms of information, e.g. to a book one can order and read in the customary way, be it in an easy chair, at the beach or while riding the underground.

The abundance of media available today makes it increasingly difficult to answer the call of 'Communio et Progressio' to the Church: the call to accept, and to become involved with, the media world. This is compounded by the issue – and the principal task, particularly for us as a Church – of not merely reflecting upon ways of using the opportunities available. The Church must also direct its attention, and the attention of others, to the category of responsibility for one's actions and to the standards that apply to that responsibility.

We also have to ask ourselves what message we wish to convey, via which media paths, to which user group. A new catchphrase here is 'target-group-specific appeal'. In recent years, we have learned a great deal about users' interests and needs. Based on a survey using representative questions, the 'Religion Monitor', a world-wide examination undertaken by the Bertelsmann Stiftung, found that faith and religiousness are far more widespread in the German population than is commonly assumed. For instance, according to the study, some 70 percent of Germans can be considered religious, and a full 20 percent or nearly one respondent in five, as highly religious. Our media-services provider Medien-Dienstleistungsgesellschaft (MDG) commissioned the Sinus Sociovision Company to conduct surveys, resulting in detailed descriptions of individual social environments. Based on these findings, we know which values are held by which specific social

groups, what these groups expect of the Church, and the media through which these groups can be reached.

A wealth of utopian hopes have been vested in the new media, and in the Internet in particular: hopes for transcendence of physical boundaries, the availability of an infinite world of knowledge and communication, democratisation through participation by each and every individual, and the creation of wholly new communications structures within social networks. At first glance, many of the keywords that surface in this connection seem to incorporate and advance the vision of 'Communio et Progressio': opportunity for all, community, democracy and progress. As it turns out, though, these new technologies do not automatically pave the way to a better world. Multiplication of the offerings and the issuers of messages has brought with it a once-unimaginable confusion. The truly important and authentic message risks being drowned out in the data rubbish of the often meaningless babbling found in chats, blogs and forums. For many people all around the world, this brave new network-world – in which so-called and oftentimes self-proclaimed connoisseurs and experts navigate as a matter of course – remains inaccessible, confusing and foreign, and not just because they lack necessary technology. Instead of achieving access and equality of opportunity for all people, the current state of affairs actually creates new barriers. Elitist circles with exclusive access rights are creating separate worlds rather than promoting the vision of a single world. At the same time, a great deal of financial and technological effort will still be required to bridge the 'digital divide' between the countries of the North and those of the South, and between urban centres and rural areas. We should all be dedicated to developing the opportunities that these new technologies present in order to make them beneficial to as many as possible – without underestimating the risks involved. The new social networks enable closer contact among people, across boundaries. At the same time, though, there are questionable forms of contact, such as harassment in cyberspace or the skimming of user data for commercial purposes.

The shift in weight in communication – away from ideas and towards images – plays a large role in getting one's message across where immediacy and emotional response are involved. Images are very persuasive tools: they enable one to see things with one's own eyes. At the same time, multiplication of images, and the new technologies of reproducibility, also present increased opportunities for manipulation. Computer-generated digital images – making virtual worlds visible and immediate – raise questions for us. Questions relating to the power that images can wield over an individual; questions about the implications of a development that increasingly wrenches people out of reality and away from real contacts, transporting them instead into virtual second-hand worlds, worlds of pure appearance. I am referring to violent computer games here, and virtual worlds such as 'Second Life'. Here, too, there are very serious questions about conscious acceptance of the category of responsibility for our actions, and responsibility for the trends under way in the larger society. These concerns are very specific, and they present us with questions: what images do we want to see on the Internet, what do we want to show, present, and use – or not?

In this context, I am reminded of a very important remark by the philosopher Heinrich Spaemann: 'We are configured by our intentions, and we thus become what they depict; we will eventually arrive at that place that is currently the centre of our gaze.' Our attempts to come to terms with the shooting rampage in a school in Winnenden in March 2009 only seem to confirm the truth of this thought. Or to make it more specific: if young people spend a large portion of their time viewing violent films or playing killer games at the computer day and night, then there is a danger that what

they have seen will creep into their heads and trickle it like poison into their souls. And if these young people then encounter massive problems in real life, or if they live in surroundings that foster violence, then they may just blow a fuse. 'We are configured by our intentions, and we thus become what they depict'. This sentence is also a warning that we must be careful about *what* we have in view (and about the views with which we confront others). For that is our destination. I would like to strongly second the statements by German President Horst Köhler in his remarks at the memorial services in Winnenden:

'It is also a question of self-respect as to which films *I watch*, which games *I play*, which example *I set* for my friends, my children and for my fellow human beings. Self-respect also involves the ability to say "No" to things one considers wrong – even if they are not prohibited. Most of us have a sense of the distinction between good and evil. Let us live our lives accordingly! Let us look closely at the images we have of our fellow human beings, and at the images we accept in our surroundings – images that influence our views of ourselves: What do we expect of others? How beautiful, clever and strong must a person be in order to be accepted? (...) What becomes of those who do not measure up to such images? How quickly is one considered out of place – simply because he or she differs from our expectations; and simply because we are too complacent to reflect for a moment, and to adjust our clichés?'

Ladies and gentlemen, the Church's stance with regard to the media has always involved a dual perspective. It has identified the opportunities whilst at the same time noting and naming the risks involved. We cannot ignore the new developments in the media area. If we wish to answer the call of 'Communio et Progressio', we need to examine the media possibilities available to us, and at the same time to think about how we can ensure and improve upon the presence of the messages of the Church in the digital future. The reflections by the German Bishops' Conference in recent years have energetically pursued achievement of this aim. The point is not to join forces with an uncritical faith in progress but rather to use the media such that the opportunities they present can become a reality. Initially, the new media present nothing more than technological innovations. What is important is to utilise these innovations in a way that makes them a blessing for all.

In the German Bishops' Conference, we resolved early this year to expand our offerings online. The aim is to make use of the broad spectrum of media available – multimedia, audio programmes, texts – whilst at the same time thinking in terms of cross-media applications, i.e. networking the wealth of offerings we already have with new ones. An important reason for this step is rooted in the observed change in habits of Internet use. The Internet is a key source of information for younger people, but older people are increasingly making use of this medium as well. The social groups that turn to progressive technology in the greatest numbers are also the groups that constitute the engine for social change. For the Church to fail to use the new media in pursuit of its aims would be to exclude entire groups of individuals. Today, we have a wealth of information at our fingertips with regard to potential addressees, yet we still need to learn a great deal about how a programme must be designed, in terms of form and content, if it is actually to reach a specific group of people. The level of involvement that we intend to achieve on the Internet will call for the courage to experiment, and the space in which to carry the experiments carry out. Only then can we learn the best way or ways of appealing to people. We also want to devise our own, Church-based Internet offerings as a way of conveying our faith authentically, both now and in future. If we are to be able to judge, assess, support or criticise current events, a conscious effort must be made to situate these events in the context of Christian faith. The number of providers of religious content

online has multiplied several times over. We cannot leave the field to the sects and the fundamentalist groups. If someone is looking online for answers to questions of faith, he or she should also find the authentic voice of the Church.

For all of our activity in the area of multimedia communication, we should rely upon a strength that is ours alone: the authenticity of our faith. In a digital world in which reality is gradually succumbing to the virtual and deception and false promises are on the order of the day, voices that are credible – voices that can express an interest in the salvation of mankind and of human society – are certain to attract attention. I am convinced of this. Virtual worlds into which people flee can help pass the time for a few hours, but they cannot answer the world's existential questions – let alone bring redemption.

The paths upon which we are embarked are new; too often, they are still uncertain as well. But we tread them nonetheless, sustained by the hope that good contents, stable truths and a message of joy can prevail. What does this mean for our involvement in terms of the activities of CAMECO? The experiences and reflections that have shaped media work in the Church, both in Germany and in Europe, are a building block for the kinds of things we can pass along. The real conditions, the social structures, the specifics of media legislation, etc., cannot be simply transplanted from one country to the next. Where the fundamental insights, the necessity, and the conditions of Church communication are concerned, however, things may be entirely different. The plea of 'Communio et Progressio' was for the Church to accept the realities of the media world. The specifics of how this can be accomplished in the various regions of the globe are a function of many local factors. Yet it is a challenge for us, too, to enlist the opportunities for networking and exchange, along with – and particularly so – the countries of the East and the South. The new technologies offer many opportunities for local Church communities in Africa, Asia, Latin America, and Central and Eastern Europe to have their voices heard more than ever before. This will also intensify contacts with those countries in which we provide assistance. 'Communio et Progressio' was clear on this point when it stated: 'Cultural cooperation is not the giving of alms. It is an exchange that is mutually advantageous.' (Art. 94) The new information technologies open up avenues for expanding and intensifying this exchange in all directions: between South and North, and between West and East.

With this in mind, it is my firm wish that the work of CAMECO will not only strengthen the media effort in the South and East, but that it will also make us aware of what is taking place in the Catholic Church in these countries, breathing life into the spirit of brotherly and sisterly bonds. We can then continue the work, together, of building one world of mutual respect, justice and peace.

Thank you for your attention!

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