

## LEARNING TO «WALK ON WATER»

*Un foyer sur trois dans le monde possède un magnétoscope. Certes les taux de pénétration sont très différents par exemple entre l'Europe et les Etats-Unis qui trusteront 64% du marché mondial et l'Afrique sub-saharienne qui ne pèse que pour 0,7%. Quels que soient ces écarts, le marché mondial des magnétoscopes s'est multiplié par 15 entre 1981 et 1991 (et même par 20 pour l'Afrique sub-saharienne!). Cette vidéomania sévit aussi dans les Eglises au point qu'un auteur très sérieux a intitulé un livre récent : "La civilisation vidéo-chrétienne". Sous toutes les latitudes au sein de l'Eglise fleurissent les projets de productions vidéo. Mais sans doute peu mesurent la difficulté de l'entreprise. C'est pourquoi nous avons demandé au P. John Wijngaards, Directeur de HOusetop et producteur exécutif de la série de programmes vidéo "Walking On Water", de nous raconter son aventure depuis son enseignement biblique en Inde jusqu'à sa "marche sur les eaux" caméra au poing dans un esprit de co-production internationale exceptionnel.*

Fr. John Wijngaards, Director of HOusetop, London, and Executive Producer of the video series "Walking On Water" was asked by CAMECO to present to our Information Bulletin readers the adventures of his international video co-production with local partners worldwide.

WALKING ON WATER, now active in twenty countries, is to my knowledge the most adventurous Catholic video co-production project ever launched. I have been asked to describe the way we have walked thus far: the crossroads, the pitfalls, the blind alleys and the mapping of our route. It is a long tale I will have to keep short. It is like entering the witness box and the confessional at the same time.

### THE ORIGINAL IDEA

If lateral thinking is a good thing, it helps to be pushed laterally through life I suppose, as happened to me. I have seen active service teaching Scripture, running a TV, film, radio and publishing centre in India, planning Church renewal and managing missionary personnel on six continents. Fate made me write academic commentaries, novels, spiritual books, newspaper columns, comic strips and Hollywood-type scripts for films.

This mix of experience helped me to conceive a bold plan in 1985 while I was on a lecture tour in India. I knew there was a real need, worldwide, of making the Gospels accessible to lay people. Video was entering the scene as a group medium with real promise. Unfortunately, the lack of proper resources made many groups turn to Pentecostal, preaching-type videos which, apart from their cultural mismatch, promoted a dangerous fundamentalism. The only answer, I saw, was offering the right kind of video that would combine reliable Scripture teaching with the participatory learning techniques inherent in good video.

However, seemingly unsurmountable obstacles loomed on the horizon. Creating professional videos is a complex and costly business. Few Christian communities have the resources in finance and personnel to invest in any major video project. On the other hand, importing videos from abroad can be a disaster. My own media work had convinced me that Christian films made in Italy or the USA should not be used in India. Apart from the culture clash, it fosters a counter-productive image: 'To be a Christian means to be foreign'. Instead of touting Pasolini or Zeffirelli, my centre *Amruthavani* prodded secular film producers in Madras to produce a three-hour feature film on the Life of Christ (based on Fr. Coelho's script *Karunamayudu*) which was screened in Telugu, Hindi and Tamil. In some cinemas it ran for a hundred days non-stop!

The solution for good video was, I saw, to set up the project as a true co-production. Just as Japanese, Australian and Swedish companies could co-produce a filmed report on, say, camels in the Sahara - using the same images but presenting them in forms targeted to their audiences, so we Christians should learn to co-produce on things we have in common.

After my return I put my plan before my HOusetop team, a group of wise and enthusiastic men and women with experience of communication in Africa, Asia and Eastern Europe. We talked and agonised and prayed, then kneaded the first clay. We called the project *Sitting at Jesus' Feet*.

## CONSULTATIONS

I submitted our plan to experts I knew in various fields. They included communicators, pastoral workers, catechists, theologians, Scripture men and women, and missiologists. Face-to-face encounters soon grew to lengthy meetings: in London, Munich, Rome, Dublin, Bogotá and Nairobi. I talked to the Catholic Media Council, Sonolux, the World Federation of Biblical Apostolate, OCIC, UNDA, WACC and others. A consultation which lasted ten full days was convened in Yogyakarta. It was attended by twenty-five participants from far and wide and proved a real turning point.

Two years of consultation (1986 & 1987) gave birth to the forty-three 'principles of production' which still govern the project. As they say in Nigeria, if you hatch it long enough, an egg will learn to walk. What discoveries had we made?

In our original plan we had, naively, assumed that the videos should be of a documentary nature. Catechists and parish workers made us see that presenting Scripture in the form of contemporary stories would be more helpful to ordinary people. Communicators pointed out that teaching is better conveyed through written material which can be presented *viva voce* in small groups; while video lends itself better to convey models, emotions, other people's lives. Stories, I found out, can be shared cross-culturally provided they deal with general human life experiences.

All this led to the present format of our WALKING ON WATER courses. Each course contains a course book (with instruction) a video (with stories filmed in various countries) and a guide (which explains the method).

Our exchanges with Latin America persuaded us that the courses should offer community-centred action and change. We replaced the original title with the more dynamic one WALKING ON WATER. We also decided to test the format in a pilot project which was filmed by PUSKAT on Java in 1988. The story was shown to audiences in Europe, Africa and Latin America. The response was amazingly positive, and crucially critical. Among the lessons we learned were important matters relating to content, sequence in production and international organisation.

## THE NETWORK

Co-production is like conducting an orchestra with instruments that are played thousands of miles apart. Harmony will not be achieved unless each player knows what music to play, and when. And players need to be found. Roughly they fit into five wings: central resource persons, local production partners, feedback advisers, PR contacts and distributors.

Our production partners in a given country need to be visionary as well as competent. The perfect solution involves the combination of a studio, a catechetical institute and a publishing house. Once initial contacts have been made, we ask our partner(s) to organise a local consultation of media people, pastoral workers and theologians. After introducing the theme, we brainstorm with them to find suitable story lines. From this an initial script emerges.

Since the story, though filmed in one country, will be seen in many others, we next circularise the script to a network of 165 feedback advisers - experts on all continents who know about WALKING ON WATER and who are willing to vet the script for us. A story to be filmed in Columbia can thus be pre-tested on its credibility in, say, the Philippines, Korea, Zimbabwe, Canada or Spain. The responses we receive help us avoid cross-cultural clashes. At times they force us to entirely re-write the script.

From the start we keep in mind that co-producers all over the world are going to use the material. We minimise dialogues or monologues and write the scripts with a voice-over narration in view. Our Gospel scenes are presented in simple, universally understood line drawings. On our international master tapes we keep music and effects on a separate sound track; and omit English titles and captions.

For PR reasons we have recruited fifteen prominent ecclesiastical patrons, among them three Cardinals and two Archbishops. There are 350 key persons in 60 countries on our general mailing list. Keeping our network going is a costly business. Mailing our scripts to our feedback advisers costs \$ 1,400.00 each time; sending progress reports to all our contacts \$ 800.00. But it is well worth the expense.

## BEING LOCAL WORLD-WIDE

Experience has taught us to be very democratic and open in consultations, but to maintain a firm central control on contents, quality of production and legal rights. We base our contracts on an international model also favoured by the BBC.

In whatever country we produce, we rely on our local partner(s) to supply the director, camera crew, actors and actresses and all other requirements. Hubert de By, our Housetop series producer, observes the filming to assist in any way possible. He also has the delicate, but essential task of intervening when professional standards are broken.

We have pleasant memories with all our partners; but frank criticism and tough decisions are also on the menu. On one occasion an incompetent director had to be sacked. On another, when everyone was on location the camera broke down and a new one had to be flown in from 1,600 miles away. It has even happened to us once that after an initial editing by our partner in a second-rate studio, we had to have crucial scenes re-shot and the whole film re-edited. Hardly a laughing matter, and a blow to our budget! Talking of which, I must return to funding.

## OILING THE AXLES

Though the level of wages and overheads vary from country to country, professional

video does not come cheap anywhere. The cost per minute will often be a hefty \$ 2,000.00 or more. To find the funding for WALKING ON WATER has called for ingenuity and careful planning; even though its future use in so many countries makes the project eminently economical.

The secret of success so far has lain in dividing the overall project into manageable 'bites' which can be submitted to individual agencies for co-funding. Getting support was more difficult during the initial stages, before tangible results could be seen. Step by step is the answer: like climbing a rope ladder, trusting that the next rung will materialise in time. But, if you allow an old-timer to give you advice: never, never start spending on part of a project for which funding has not yet been found. I hear you say 'Stop trying to teach an old gorilla how to pick fleas!'

In spite of our staunch business-like approach, we always insist on putting this clause into our contracts: 'Both partners consider this an apostolic venture which we want to succeed'. The most exciting thing in WALKING ON WATER for me is the numerous inspired and committed partners we have found, men and women who share our ideals and with whom we continue on our journey. If you too want to join, or just to know more, write to me at Housetop, 39 Homer Street, London W1H 1HL, UK; fax 44-71-723 2668. Why not put your first step on water?

*John Wijngaards*

## CAMECO AT THE CROSSROADS

After completion of seventeen years of service at CAMECO - six years of which in the position of Executive Director - Fr. Marcel Vanhengel o.p., retired from the Catholic Media Council on 31st July 1991, to actively continue however in his commitment to the development of communications in the service of the Church. On 1st October of this year, Mr. Hans-Peter Gohla was officially delegated as his successor (cf. p. 8). In addition, at the end of June 1991, Daniela Frank completed her two-year contract as part-time collaborator at CAMECO, and 31st August last, Dr. Michael Krzeminski left CAMECO after a service of more than six years, to take up a new challenge in the field of media research in Europe, at the University of Siegen, West Germany. A new collaborator, Karen Watermann will be joining the CAMECO team on January 2nd 1992.

Do these changes in personnel, as well as the amendments to the statutes of CAMECO (modification of membership in CAMECO's General Assembly) announce a "new CAMECO"? As Mr. Jean-Marie Brunot, President of CAMECO, advised in his circular letter addressed to close partners of our office, "I would like to reassure you all that nothing has changed concerning the aims, the independence and the professional outlook of CAMECO".