

## THE NATIONAL OFFICES FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

### PRACTICAL ORGANISATION OF A NATIONAL OFFICE FOR S.C.

*Dans un précédent numéro de l'Information Bulletin (1/1990), le CAMECO avait apporté une première contribution sur le rôle et la fonction des commissions et offices nationaux de communication sociale, dont la tâche principale devrait être la coordination des activités de l'Eglise dans le domaine de la communication en stimulant, promouvant et harmonisant les efforts sur le plan national particulièrement, mais en relation étroite avec les activités déployées dans les diocèses et à la base.*

*Comme annoncé nous voudrions revenir sur ce sujet : en effet les offices nationaux pour la communication sont l'élément clé pour le développement de la communication dans l'Eglise. Aussi, malgré les risques d'une généralisation abusive, proposons-nous ci-après quelques orientations pratiques pour l'organisation de tels offices ainsi que les conditions minimales nécessaires pour que ces offices nationaux puissent opérer avec quelque efficacité.*

In the first issue 1990 of the Information Bulletin the National Offices for Social Communications were described as key elements for communications development in the Church. According to the teachings of the second Vatican Council expressed in the Decree "Inter Mirifica" (1964) and the Pastoral Instruction "Communio et Progressio" (1972), the National Offices, together with the National Commissions for Social Communications, carry the main responsibility for an effective communications apostolate of the Church. The many positive reactions we received on this article signify the relevance of deepened efforts in building up the necessary infra-structures for communications, in training suitable candidates for the corresponding positions and elaborating concepts how to channel the Church's activities in communications in modern society.

This present article intends to propose some very practical guidelines for the organisation of such an office and to indicate the minimum requirements for running it efficiently within the specific cultural, social and political situations and opportunities of a given country or region.

In the previous article the different tasks of a National Office for Social Communications in relation to the corresponding Episcopal Commission or Bishop-delegate were outlined. Very likely the crucial point in this function is the *coordination* of the activities of the Church in the field of communications by stimulating, promoting and harmonising efforts especially at national level, but in close contact with the local and diocesan activities.

The decisive constituents of a National Communication Office are: A competent staff and a concrete feasible programme.

#### COMPETENT STAFF

The minimum personnel required is a full-time national communications director - either a priest, a sister or a lay person, assisted by a full- or part-time secretary, according to the actual needs.

The Executive Director of a National Office should be professionally trained and experienced in the field of communications for several years - theoretically as well as practically. An extended knowledge in communication management and administration will be of special importance in his position. He should know about the processes of communication, the opportunities and limitations of the different media - from group to printed and electronic mass media - their undissolvable inter-relation and how to handle them. Of course it would be helpful for him to have a basic knowledge of the editorial routines in preparing a newspaper or broadcasting programme, even though his tasks might not be those of a journalist or press officer. Accordingly he should not be too much geared towards one or the other media category, avoiding the danger of over-emphasising a specific field. At the same time he should be acquainted with the different Catholic media institutions and organisations in the country - a central aspect to fulfill his coordinating tasks. All in all, he should be competent, with an overall vision on communications, able to become an accepted partner for all involved in the media apostolate.

Many "should's", many requirements - but what if there is no-one available to match this profile? As the Executive Director plays a key role in the National Communication Office, it should be first priority to offer a suitable candidate the opportunities for appropriate training - and that means in his specific case not a very specialised one, but courses which provide insights into the overall structures and essentials of communications and media in modern society. Better to take the necessary time until this condition can be fulfilled rather than going ahead without a proper candidate, finally losing time, human and financial resources as well as energy and optimism to face the communications challenges and imperatives.

#### NECESSARY INFRASTRUCTURE

In order to cope with its daily business, a National Office of Social Communications needs some infrastructure: an appropriate office, and basic equipment. Not always a completely separate or new place has to be established. Often the integration into an existing institution like the Catholic National Secretariat might be the most appropriate (and also cheapest) solution for running the office, offering opportunities for shared use of the necessary services and facilities like copier, telefax, telephone, transport, security, maintenance and cleaning, etc.

However, the National Communication Office should be able to rely on the following:

- Sufficient space: at least two or three rooms, one for the director, another for the secretariat and/or for documentation/library. The National Office should be a source of knowledge and materials, keeping text books and manuals, periodicals and respective documents on communications. Accordingly there should be easy access to this information. This room can also function as a kind of conference/visitors room.

- Office equipment: Such as a computer unit for word processing. A good configuration would be: AT 286 with a 40 MB hard-disc, a 24-dot matrix printer plus the necessary software. A photocopier, telephone and telefax (with auto-switch so that no special line is needed) are essential facilities for enabling easy contacts.

- Facilities for the preparation and publishing of a regular newsletter (e.g. every

two months, eight pages, with news, appointments, relevant documents for the Bishops institutions), pamphlets, and occasional papers.

The last point will immediately raise the question whether a National Office should own production facilities, e.g. an office printing unit. Of course, the communications director should not be the Catholic Secretariat's printer. But he should at least have easy access to the printing facilities which normally are available in any national Catholic Secretariat.

- AV facilities. Some instruments for social communications such as a small sound studio or video unit might be very useful. This question cannot be generally answered for all specific cases, but one should keep in mind that the first task of a National Office is coordination and inspiration, not production. Its Executive Director is the one to bring new ideas, developing and promoting an overall communications and media policy and planning. He should know the people and organisations who can realize them professionally, and bring together those to be involved in a specific project. If they need access to adequate equipment for production and training, another project (studio?) should be developed. But as the communications director himself should be free of regular production duties, there is no immediate need for own facilities in the National Office. However, in special cases and countries where no media organisations of the Church are working to produce communication material as in countries where the Catholic Church is a minority, production facilities for a National Office can be considered.

The National Office should be organized according to its basic task: coordination and promotion. Therefore the Executive Director should be as well informed as possible to enable him to inform others. He is a resource person, reporting the Church to the World, but also the World to the Church. Hence, he should have close contacts with the other departments of the Bishops' Conference and receive all kind of documents related to the pastoral and developmental visions and activities of the Church, being fully integrated into the structure of the Catholic Secretariat. In this way he can be of immediate help to the different departments in developing suitable communications instruments - for an overall media planning integrated into the national pastoral concept. At the same time he should be present or even be a

member of the different Catholic, Christian and secular media organisations.

### REALISTIC OPERATIONAL BUDGET

Very often the ineffectiveness of a National Communication Office is supposed to be "finances". Therefore some elementary questions should be considered. Which items are relevant in calculating the operational budget? What are the possible sources of income to cover them? The situation in the respective countries differs, costs depend e.g. on how far office infrastructures can be used together with other departments. Thus, no concrete figures can be mentioned here, but it could be helpful to list single items which the budget should include:

- Salaries - for the communications officer and the secretary
- travel costs - including regular local transport
- office rental
- books, subscriptions and membership fees
- telephone (also including fax fees) and mail postage
- other office costs like paper, electricity etc.
- budget for special productions such as the newsletter, single publications
- budget for the organisation of meetings (National Commission or Advisory Board for Social Communications; exchange

of Catholic communicators, etc).

To cover the total expenses, different sources of income can be taken into account:

- the contribution of the Bishops' Conference - also expressing how seriously social communications is taken within the national pastoral planning;
- contributions of the diocesan communication offices (as the national office is also at their service);
- collection of funds, especially on occasion of the yearly World Communications Day;
- other income such as grants, subsidies, donations ...

In any way, a budget has to be elaborated with expenses and income corresponding to one another. Simple but detailed book-keeping is extremely important and should be taken care of by the secretary. It should include regular check-ups, e.g. each month, so to make income and expenses transparent for planning.

As mentioned at the beginning, this article only wants to provide some concrete guide lines on the organisation of a National Office for Social Communications. For some of our readers it could become a base for future plans to start a new initiative, for others it might be of help to re-think or even restructure existing ones. As the National Offices play a key role in the development of communications structures in the Church, all possible efforts should be made to enable and secure the effectiveness of their apostolate. *df/vh*

### CHRISTIAN COMMUNICATIONS DIRECTORIES

The series started in 1980 with a volume on Africa. This year the last and sixth volume on Hispano Latin-America will be published.

Shall we continue the project and update the series, starting with Africa or rather go for publishing the most important data in one handbook later on?

What is your opinion? Could you make use of the directories at all?

We would like to know the advice of our readers and ask you to fill in the enclosed enquiry sheet and sent it back to us. Thank you for your collaboration.