

1985/II

## THE ROLE AND FUNCTION OF A CHURCH-OWNED PRINTING PRESS. THE AFRICAN EXPERIENCE.

*The Pan-African Seminar on the future of the Catholic Press held in Yaoundé, Cameroun, November 1984 resulted in very fundamental observations and recommendations. A remarkable contribution was given in the final report presented by the Anglophone Workgroup, which deserves attention even outside Africa.*

1. Historical perspective. The Church has played a pioneering role in the introduction of print technology in Africa. In several countries, the first printing presses were established and run by Church personnel. The reason for this was clear: to facilitate the word of God. Historically this took place in two phases. The first was to make available translations of the Bible, the Church's programme material for Christian formation (catechism, prayer and hymnbooks etc), and the dictionaries and early anthropological studies which were necessary for the work of the missionaries. The scope of the second phase was much wider. Printing presses were meant to facilitate mainly through the production of newspapers and magazines, the Church's influence on public opinion - often in the service of justice - and aimed at liberation. Furthermore, they were to serve the goals of integral human development by providing reading material for new literates, aids to socio-economic development, and expression for the creative spirit in Africa, its novelists and poets. In the second phase of the establishment of printing presses, the need for Christian periodicals played a major role. Many of our printing presses were founded with the expressed purpose of enabling the publication of a newspaper or a magazine.

We know of no instance when a printing press was established with, say, the purpose of providing income for the running of a diocese or - for that matter - the work of a religious order. Many of the Church-owned printing presses were originally established to serve an entire linguistic area or even the whole territory which is now a sovereign nation. But when dioceses were established, Church-owned printing presses became the property of these dioceses in which they happened to be located. Some such presses, although owned by a diocese, still serve an entire linguistic area or the whole country. In other cases, presses have become the jealously guarded prerogative of an individual diocese or Bishop.

2. Ancillary role of printing press: A Church-owned printing press is no end in itself. Its purpose is to help the spread of the word. It is thus in the service of Christian publishing - both periodicals and books. In many countries of Africa, such Christian publishing could not easily take place without Church-owned printing presses. In some cases, government run or commercial printing presses would not want to print Christian books or periodicals, or do so at exorbitant costs. In others, the existing printing capacities are simply not sufficient to take on the Church's publishing requirements.

3. Printing presses should subsidise Christian publishing: Being in the service of the word, printing presses can play a key role of making Christian publishing economically feasible. This is particularly true for the publishing of Christian periodicals. Income from sales of copies (circulation) and from advertisements, cannot, in the vast majority of cases, defray the cost of the newspaper or magazine publishing. Christian periodicals depend on the direct or indirect subsidies from Church-owned typesetting units or print shops. This however, presupposes that Church-owned printing presses are profit making. To achieve this, they would normally have to set aside a portion of their machine hours for commercial printing. If printing presses, in spite of doing commercial jobbing, are not profitable, it is usually due to lack of proper management or non-competitive (antiquated) equipment, or both. We strongly support the technical and managerial development of those printing presses which are committed to Christian publishing, but no point in aiding those which lack in such commitment.

4. The wastage of some book printing. Much time and precious raw material is wasted on the printing of books and booklets which, though they may be valuable in their content remain in the warehouse of the 'procures' or fill the store-room of the parishes. Much of the Church's book production is haphazard, unplanned, and is not tied into a marketing structure.

In other words, book printing can be wasteful if it is not part of the wider and integrated process of book publishing. One of the great communication needs of the Catholic Church in Africa is the establishment of professionally run Christian book publishing houses. Their production should include at least a part of the Church's formation material, such as catechisms, hymnbooks etc.

5. Income from stationary: The production of stationary is part of the work of our printing presses. It can become a considerable source of income, provided that realistic prices are charged for it. Stationary has little or nothing to do with the spread of the word. It should therefore be sold at near-commercial rates.

6. The perennial problem of foreign exchange: Neither Christian periodicals nor Church-owned printing presses can be expected to secure the foreign exchange needed for the purchase of raw materials (or in the case of bookshops, the purchase of foreign books). Most dioceses and religious orders have the possibility of making foreign exchange available for Christian publishing. Herein lies an expression of their commitment to the spread of the word.

7. Towards a new basis of Cooperation: Christian publishing and Church owned printing have a symbolic relationship with each other. One cannot exist without the other. A printing press, to fulfill its mission, needs Christian publishing. And publishing, particularly the publishing of Christian periodicals, needs a well run and profitable printing press. Herein lies not only tensions, but also challenges. To solve the tension and meet the challenges, a new basis of cooperation is necessary. Having learned the lessons of the past, we feel that the relationship between the two print media institutions cannot merely be left to the goodwill and judgement of those responsible for them. To achieve the overall purpose of Christian publishing, some structural changes may be necessary in some cases, including change in proprietorship. In other cases the relationship will have to be made more secure by the drawing up of contracts and memoranda of understanding. All such relationships must however, be based on the divine imperative that "the word can run" (St. Paul).

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*Pendant le Séminaire Pan-Africain sur l'Avenir de la Presse Catholique tenu au Cameroun en novembre 1984, le Groupe de Travail de l'Afrique anglophone a formulé dans son rapport final des observations et recommandations extrêmement valables pour toute entreprise de presse de l'Eglise que se soit en Asie, en Amérique Latine ou en Océanie. Une IMPRIMERIE de l'Eglise doit s'intégrer dans un programme de publications, livres ou périodiques, et contribuer effectivement à leur viabilité financière. C'est là sa raison d'être primordiale. A cet effet, toute imprimerie devra être montée et exploitée de manière professionnelle. Pour être rentable une certaine commercialisation s'imposera presque toujours.*