

CORK

Source: Informaciones OCIC, t. 1, Año 3, n.º 14, 1985

IS CATHOLIC TV ON ITS WAY?

HOW THE CHURCH COULD BE PRESENT IN TV

by Daniela Frank

For a long time, Christian communication was identified with personal relations and group media. And in many regions, this understanding is still valid, not only because of political or legal limitations.

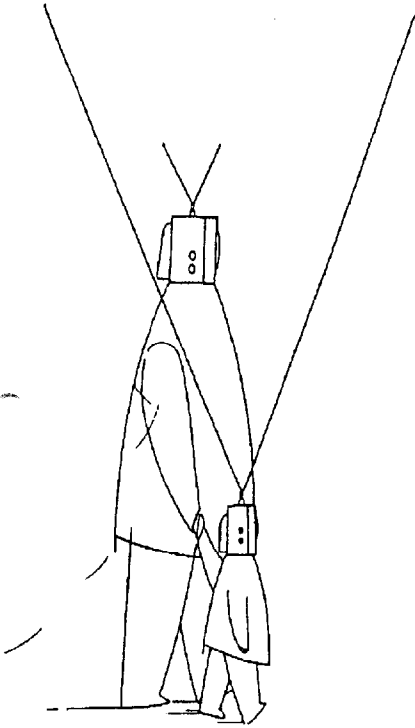
In other parts of the world and already for decades, the Church has been trying to find a path in the jungle of mass communication. The involvement of many Church-related groups in popular communication can be seen as one possible way to be present in mass media without leaving behind an "alternative" concept of giving "voice to the voiceless". For a considerable period, the favourite medium for doing this was radio. That is why Latin America can be called the continent of Catholic radio, and in many African countries, new political developments allow the operation of Church radio stations as well.

In the meantime a new chapter has been opened. During the past years, the Catholic Church - especially in Latin America - has paid special attention to the strengthening of her presence in television. Television is seen as the most widespread and powerful communication instrument. Thus, why leave it only to profit-oriented business-men to make use of its effect? Should not the Church now struggle for a place among the big media enterprises, especially in television?

Following a period in which priority was given to the foundation and operation of video and film production centres, now, special efforts are being made to establish own TV stations or to promote them under Church auspices. Just to name three examples from Latin America:

Canal 11, Maracaibo, was founded in 1986 by the charity organization "Niños Cantores" which also runs a FM radio station, schools and a college as well as different social projects. Highly professionally equipped, it reaches various parts of Venezuela and is finally aiming at national coverage, unlike Televisão

Few examples



Development of a programme concept

"Catholic" should not be reduced to religious programming

Sudoeste de Paraná (Pato Branco, Brasil) of the Franciscans, which is operating at regional level.

In TV Sudoeste, two hours of the daily programme schedule are prepared by the station itself, with cultural, promotional and information programmes, covering themes of regional interest, as well as pastoral spots. The other part of the daily programme is taken over by the commercial TV network "Manchete".

Only three years ago, the Fundación para la Educación en la TV (FETV) in Panama started operations. The Board, the owner of the station, brings together the Catholic Bishops' Conference and the Catholic University USMA, the Jewish Community and the Ecumenical Council as well as four representatives of social groups. The programme concentrates on cultural (theatre, concerts, films), educational and children's productions, taken over from various international suppliers.

Several other Catholic TV initiatives are presently in preparation or have started only recently, such as "Rede Vida" of INBRAC (Brazilian Institute of Christian Communications) located in São Paulo, the Bolivian "Copacabana de Televisión - Canal 18" in La Paz or "Televida", a project of the Dominican Bishops' Conference.

Already now these very few examples illustrate the possible variety of Church TV activities. It would surely be difficult to summarize the work of these TV projects, as they differ not only concerning ownership and coverage, but also with regard to programme concepts and economic possibilities. Nevertheless, from the projects brought to our attention, we would like to note our observations and raise some principal questions on this development towards Catholic television.

What makes a station successful?

The central factor deciding the "to be or not to be" of a TV station is its programme concept. But exactly this point often appears to be the weakest in the planning process, not really being tackled with the attention it deserves. In the presentation of a TV project, responsables often stress some key words underlining a Christian orientation against the usual commercial offers, but regularly concrete information concerning a weekly programme scheme, themes to be covered, adequate programme formats etc., is missing.

Church TV projects are confronted with a multiple challenge: to be credible in their educational and pastoral tasks by offering a programme of high quality, which at the same time should be entertaining and as variously shaped as possible. Most likely this might be the only way to reach a large number of viewers and at the same time be attractive for publicity clients.

Many responsables seem to be convinced that meeting the pastoral demands would automatically result in a broad circulation and acceptance. The programme drafts generally have a clear religious accent, but there is an obvious shortage of information and entertainment.

On the other hand, stations like that of the Franciscans in Pato Branco (Paraná, Brasil) with its local news productions, or FETV Panama with its cultural and educational accent are able to fill a gap in the TV scene and to reach a broader audience by just not concentrating on religious content, as this field is already covered by others. In most Latin American countries, TV stations are prepared and willing to transmit religious services and catechetical programmes. In Brasil, for example, there are more than 30 transmissions of the Sunday Eucharist on the different commercial TV stations, as well as the weekly half-hour programme "Anunciamos Jesús", or the religious spots produced by "Palavra Viva", a video production group run by several religious congregations.

For many Church responsables there is no doubt that a Catholic TV station will reach a broad and greater range of viewers because of being Catholic. And they

expect the same acceptance from possible publicity clients. Nevertheless, in nearly all Latin American countries the television market is mostly saturated by national stations as well, because of the possibility of receiving foreign programmes via satellite or cable networks.

Therefore, additional channels would only have a good chance of being accepted if they are able to fill actual programme deficits - deficits noticed by the viewers and not just by the Church. Furthermore they should be able to reach target groups not yet addressed by the existing TV channels. Publicity clients too, are mainly interested in new consumer groups which they have been unable to reach up to now through other stations. A real public demand for contents not yet available and programme concepts filling this gap will in the long term decide on the competitiveness of a station - but not its (Church) ownership.

Economic capacity

Asking responsables of Church TV projects about their financial basis, it attracts attention that in most cases the operating expenses are calculated much too low.

* Generally speaking, the cost of producing own programmes is under-estimated. Qualified personnel require high salaries, and good programmes require a great deal of effort and - accordingly - money.

* At the same time, the cost of purchasing programmes for transmission is not taken sufficiently into account. Although most stations plan to collaborate with various production centres to fill their daily programme, it seems to be very often unclear whom they can concretely rely on and at what expense. Any way, collaboration is a crucial point for being able to offer a high quality, full-time programme, and: collaboration has its price as well.

* Most responsables forget the necessity to replace the technical equipment quite regularly due to rapid technological developments (see for example the high quality standard in Brasil).

Actually only "Televisão Sudoeste de Paraná" and FETV seem to be in a position to cover their operating costs without (foreign) subsidies. As mentioned already, "Televisão Sudoeste de Paraná" is the only local TV station in its region and limits itself to the production of locally oriented programmes. The other elements of the daily scheme are taken over from a commercial station. FETV manages with almost no own productions, thus avoiding the corresponding costs; instead they select educational and cultural programmes from other suppliers according to their own pedagogical criteria.

Support from the funding agencies

Up to now, Church funding agencies take quite a critical stand towards the financing of TV projects, especially concerning the coverage of operating costs. Furthermore, investments necessary for a well equipped TV studio (including fast technological changes) and the preparation of high quality programmes are very high, and the real effects of such an involvement can hardly be assessed.

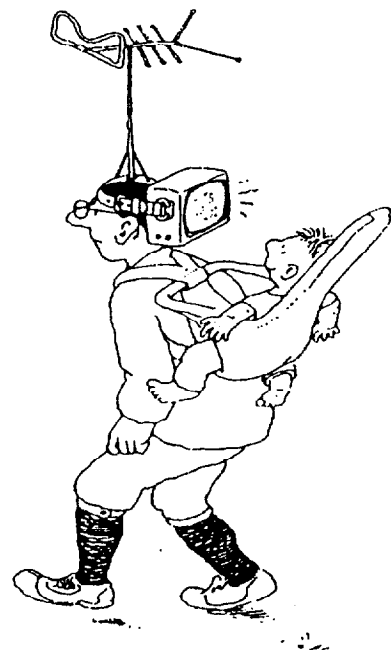
The running of a TV station creates incomparably higher expenses than those of a radio station. Nevertheless, experience in the radio field demonstrates that also well established and well accepted Catholic radio stations still depend on foreign subsidies, even if they gain income through advertisements or other sources such as listeners' clubs.

Therefore, the principle question to be raised is whether the presence of the Catholic Church in the media - and especially in television - can in fact only be secured through Church ownership of the media, and what alternatives could be considered?

In fact, it won't be possible to find an answer relative to all countries, not even for the whole of Latin America, as legal, political and economic conditions differ

Identify actual programme deficits noticed by the viewers

Running a TV station is a costly enterprise



Source: MULTIMEDIA, 25, 11.12.1994

Does the Church have to own media to be present in them?

extensively. However in many countries, the Church has the possibility of transmitting own programmes on existing TV stations and/or cable networks free of charge, or by paying only minimal amounts. This possibility normally is not limited to the Sunday Eucharist. Thus, high quality programmes, prepared by professional Church video production centres could be offered, aiming at a broader public instead of restricting itself for example to catechetical contents. In this way, the Church could be present with her specific matters of concern without having the need to fill (and finance) a full-time programme.

Cooperation with existing TV stations

One possible example - several others could be mentioned - for this type of cooperation with TV stations, is the "Trinity Television Network" (TTN) in Port of Spain (Trinidad). Founded in 1993 by the Catholic lay group "Living Water Community", TTN meanwhile produces four and a half hours of pastoral and educational programmes per week, which can be received through several local cable networks. As transmission time is offered free of charge and as many members collaborate on a voluntary basis, the costs for this TV project are quite limited. Surely not a measure for all Catholic TV initiatives, but certainly one way which would be worth thinking about!

Try to influence communications policies from a Christian point of view

Additionally, Church responsables - first of all the local Bishops - should be aware of the necessary task to get in touch with commercial television networks to discuss programmes, to stress Christian values and to look for alternatives acceptable for both sides. Such a dialogue should also include politicians and government representatives to call for transparent communications policies which take into account not only commercial but public interests. And the Church forms an important part of that public!

Whenever possible, collaboration should be chosen instead of rivalry. Communication wants to bring people together - although that is often a rather demanding task. And there are many ways and many fields of collaboration: The presence in commercial media of productions prepared by Christian video centres can help to come into contact with people not reached by other Church activities. Well-formed Catholic professionals working in secular media also realize the presence of Christian values and positions in these media. At the same time, the Church should not forget her task of continuous dialogue with those responsible for communications media, concerned "especially with the shaping of media policy" (Actaits Novae N°8).

A door has been opened for the Church towards television, but we still need the efforts of many path-finders looking for the most adequate and effective ways to be present in the mass media of today. ■

Readers' Forum in IB 3/95: The World of Video - Claims and Reality

FORUM DES LECTEURS IB 3/95
LE MONDE DE LA VIDÉO

FORO PÚBLICO EN IB 3/95:
EL MUNDO DEL VIDEO

In our last issue, we announced that the next number of the IB will be dedicated exclusively to Video. We would like to repeat our invitation to share with our readers your experiences and reflections on that media field. Please send us your contributions before July 31st 1995.

Comme nous l'avons annoncé dans l'Information Bulletin 1/95, le prochain numéro de l'IB sera totalement consacré au thème de la Vidéo. Nous renouvelons ici l'invitation lancée à nos lecteurs de partager leurs expériences et réflexions sur ce sujet. Merci de nous faire parvenir vos articles avant le 31 juillet 1995.

Cómo ya habíamos anunciado en IB 1/95 la próxima edición del Information Bulletin se dedicará al "mundo del video - pretensiones y realidad". Reiteramos nuestra invitación a participar en este "foro abierto" de experiencias y reflexiones rogándoles enviar sus comentarios hasta el 31 de julio de 1995.