

Evangelization by mass media in the new democracies:

## Strategies in the Czech Republic

*by Cardinal Miloslav Vlk, Archbishop of Prague*

Being a small nation of approximately 10 million inhabitants we do not have the same possibilities as e.g. the Bishops in the USA have, or an audience like the Brazilians, and our technical development is not the same as elsewhere. We have just overcome 40 years of communist persecution, where the principal intention was to abolish the Church from public life, mass media and public opinion. After the fall of communism we have started from zero: we do not have structures, organisations, experts or information networks. But in spite of this we are a piece in the mosaic of Church mass media, a piece in the mosaic of Central Europe, in the heart of Europe, and every piece is important.

To evaluate the possibilities of help to evangelize by means of mass media, the Czech Republic, having experienced 40 years of totalitarian pressure of a materialistic ideology and praxis of life, we refer to the conclusions of Vatican II, contained in the post-conciliar Decree *INTER MIRIFICA* and in stimulating documents such as *COMMUNIO ET PROGRESSIO* and *AETATIS NOVAE* which offered to us the principle lines for our media strategy. To its completion, in 1995 came the explicit invitation to join the Mass Media Committee of the Council of the European Bishops' Conferences (CCEE), addressed to all national Episcopal Conferences.

Proposals for a communication strategy

At the Mass Media Commission of the Czech Bishops' Conference in this period we are elaborating a proposal for a communication strategy of the Church in their present conditions. The principal thesis is the irreplaceable role of mass media in the formation of public opinion. A considerable part of the Czech population does not sympathize with the Church, caused by the influence of the past and the eloquent manipulation by liberal groups. Therefore it is first of all necessary to eliminate the prejudices accumulated during the course of history, and above all during the last 40 years, which hinder the opening-up to religious truth and serious dialogue on these arguments. After the fall of the ideology, imposed by force by the communist regime, people refuse „indoctrination“, this means, positively said, the teaching of the truth. But it is sensitive to all offers of life and the new life style. These are for us the local signs of the times. In spite of our society's fatigue caused by the numerous errors of the past regime and by the fact that the people did not arrive at new solutions to the problems fast enough, they are in search of answers to the serious problems of secular societies everywhere. Such solutions, however, have to be formulated in a modern and up-to-date way, in a comprehensible language and not in an ecclesiastical idiom. It is necessary to motivate the needs of the Church in society and indicate Christian solutions to social problems, such as the increasing criminality, especially among the youth, the failing attention to elder and marginalized people, the dishonesty, found mainly in the world of economics, manifestations of envy, personal and collective egoism, etc.

Underlining the importance of the relation with the public

In the project, prepared for the strategies of the Church, we are first of all underlining the importance of the relation with the public and how to take into consideration the different priorities of today and tomorrow. Steps to be taken to realize the project: Not having enough technical means to fulfil and face all these tasks, their execution has to be more on personal level. A team of experts and consultants is being formed to prepare the necessary documentation, and to assist the Bishops in realizing the tasks mentioned. The Mass Media Commission of the Czech Bishops' Conference, headed by myself, will coordinate the project.

Another important step in our media strategy is the creation of a network of collaborators for the press in the dioceses and major Church communities, linked

with the Press Centre of the Czech Episcopal Conference. The Press Centre prepares daily news on the life of the Church in the Czech Republic and in the world, and is in close contact with news agencies and major editorial offices. It prepares also a daily press review for the Bishops.

We have had some good experience in the organisation of press conferences, round tables and informal meetings with journalists, during which we have had the opportunity of reacting to predictable events, e.g. the continuation of the lawsuit on the ownership of the St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague. Thus the readers and listeners may become aware of our opinions with regard to the solution of the society's problems.

We are aware that the contribution of the Catholic Church to the European culture and civilization and its influence on the formation of Czech culture has to be strengthened. The jubilee of St. Adalbert, to be celebrated next year, will offer an occasion to highlight the European character of this first Bishop of „Czech blood“. Following the challenge of the Holy Father John Paul II, I have founded a commission to examine the life and work of Jan Hus, a 14th century Czech preacher. The work of this commission and its partial results have been presented to the public.

The media strategy project proposes rapid reaction, and knowledge of the cause for arguments concerning the Church to be presented to the public. First of all, a maximum of objectivity and open-mindedness is sought, with no fear of admitting to obscure pages or deficiencies. Problems have to be explained in a comprehensible language. Pastoral projects have an important rank, as described in the document AETATIS NOVAE .

We have also not forgotten the problem of dialogue within the Church. The internal situation of our Church is sometimes quite different from the problems of the Western Churches, e.g. in Austria, Germany or Switzerland. By means of mass media we intend to educate the faithful towards a culture of dialogue, not to support a unique unilateral point of view, being able to listen to others, accepting a certain polarity of opinions and sustaining the post-conciliar line. In the field of education towards dialogue, we also want to react on all positive events within society and to offer Christian alternatives, first of all in the field of morality.

In spite of this situation within the Church, a tendency to polarize thoughts is noted. Some are directed towards a certain ghetto mentality, to remain therein or to retire to it. Others want to renew the Church accepting everything - or almost everything - which the surrounding world offers. With the assistance of mass media we want to be sensitive to both tendencies, reconciling them and finding the best way to follow.

I would like to underline that the secular mass media, with some exceptions, are not in our favour but are clearly aiming against the Church and Christianity. The Church is for a majority of them one of the major social entities which has played an important role in history, but nowadays with a reduced influence on a minority of the faithful.

For comparison purposes I would like to present some data according to the latest statistics: 48% of the Czech population are considered atheists, 21% are explicitly faithful to God, and 31% admit the existence of God. This situation is reflected in discussions on themes of religious character, e.g. concerning activities of the sects, sexual problems, the role of women within the Church, family life, etc.

Our presence in the secular mass media wants to play the same role as the Church does within society: to have a connecting function with all consequences and professionalism.

Every effort has been made by us to achieve a presence in the public electronic media immediately after 1989. In January 1990, in collaboration with the Ecumenical Council of Churches we succeeded in establishing an editorial office for religious programming at the Czech Radio, staffed with four collaborators, to

Creation of a framework of collaborators

Press conference and meetings

A maximum of objectivity and open-mindedness

Presence in the secular mass media

produce and broadcast programmes on all three national channels. A contract was drawn up with the responsables of the radio station to guarantee the broadcasting of these programmes and to ensure active collaboration with the Churches. The director of the Czech Radio has invited - among others - the Archbishop of Prague and the President of the Ecumenical Council of Churches to become members of the radio's council. Regional radio stations are also broadcasting religious programmes.

Another ecumenical group is active on Czech Television and produces the weekly 45-minute programme „Christian Weekly“ and „Festive Word“. It also organizes telecasts of Church feasts and direct transmissions of the Easter and Christmas messages of the Holy Father, as well as screenings of international films on religious themes or documentaries on feast days. The commercial television is generally not interested in religious themes but programmes with religious messages are sometimes broadcast to a wide audience. In general, during Christmas-time, a kind of talk-show is transmitted, a Christmas conversation between the President of the Republic, the Prime Minister and the Cardinal, in order to strengthen the public's consciousness that the Catholic Church is a worthy partner in the effort to reorganize and form our democratic society.

Radio Proglas, a Catholic and cultural radio station, began transmissions on December 8th 1995, financed through outside sources and local donations. Broadcasts to numerous listeners are mainly religious. Advertisements are principally excluded.

The Imago Association, a small video and film production centre, was founded in 1993. This is a good example of collaboration and assistance of the French Church; the director is a French priest, and expert in this media field. Up to now, two educational cartoon series for children have been produced: „Broucci“ (sympathetic insects) with 12 episodes, and „Pastor Asaf“ with seven episodes depicting the youth of Jesus. Six documentaries and four cartoon films are in preparation, and projects for two additional films are pending. All productions have been realized with international collaboration, and some of them have been distributed in other countries.

The new technologies are of great importance to us, and are to be realized in the near future, for instance to be connected via modem or to enter the Internet.

Our experience can be resumed in the principle points. We are primarily seeking to reinforce the conscience of the importance of the mass media and collaboration with them at all levels. Having been excluded from this field for 40 years, such consciences and habits cannot be regained at once. We want to prepare faithful journalists, spiritually formed at a high professional level, to take over the task of the New Evangelization. It is for us a question of vital importance to cultivate the dialogue within the Church and to maintain close contact with today's society by means of mass-media, transmitting our style of life and helping to solve important problems. The same is valid for the efforts to strengthen contacts with Catholic Europe at the level of Episcopal Conferences, with different mass media organisations, with news agencies and the different editorial offices. Thus, even being a small nation, we want to become a piece in the mosaic of the Church in Central Europe

*Intervention of Cardinal Miloslav Vlk at the Plenary Session of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication, March 4-8, 1996: Original in Italian, translated by CAMECO.*

## RESUME

En Tchéquie, l'Eglise catholique est une toute petite minorité. Après la disparition du communisme, l'Eglise doit tout reconstruire et repartir de zéro. Récemment un programme pastoral de communication a été élaboré et présenté à la commission nationale des communications sociales de la Conférence Episcopale tchèque. Dans cet article, le Cardinal Vlk présente les principes directeurs de ce projet. Il raconte également les expériences et les problèmes que l'Eglise tchèque doit affronter pour promouvoir le dialogue en son sein mais aussi avec la société contemporaine, en particulier les médias.

## RESUMEN

La Comisión de Medios de Comunicación de la Conferencia Episcopal Checa recién ha elaborado una propuesta para la estrategia comunicativa de la iglesia. Cardenal Vlk describe en su artículo los principios fundamentales, las experiencias y los problemas a solucionar para fortalecer el diálogo dentro de la iglesia. A la vez se debe profundizar el contacto con la sociedad checa mediante los medios de comunicación tomando en cuenta que los católicos son una pequeña minoría y que la iglesia tuvo que empezar de cero después de la caída del comunismo.