

Communication Training in the Americas:

Leaving Traditional Grounds

Latin America and the US have substantial and rich differences in their approach to communications training programs, but some important similarities can be seen in two areas. First, both are evolving communications training programs that serve all the church's pastoral ministries, not only communications specialists. Second, they are building collaborative bridges between communications ministries and the other traditional ministries of the church like religious education, liturgy and youth apostolates. In other words, communications training programs are breaking out of the traditional "media specialist" arena into a broader interdisciplinary mode. This follows upon the long-standing Latin American idea of "pastoral de conjunto," collaborative ministry.

How is the faith to be inculturated in today's new media cultural context?

PASTORAL MINISTRY AND MEDIA CULTURE

At the root of this inter-disciplinary, collaborative approach is a fundamental shift that has occurred in the church's understanding of the communications media apostolate. There has been a shift from instrumentalism to inculturation. As a result, training programs have expanded their curricula which emphasized techniques of media use, to include issues of religious identity, faith formation and public witness because these now take place in a media culture.

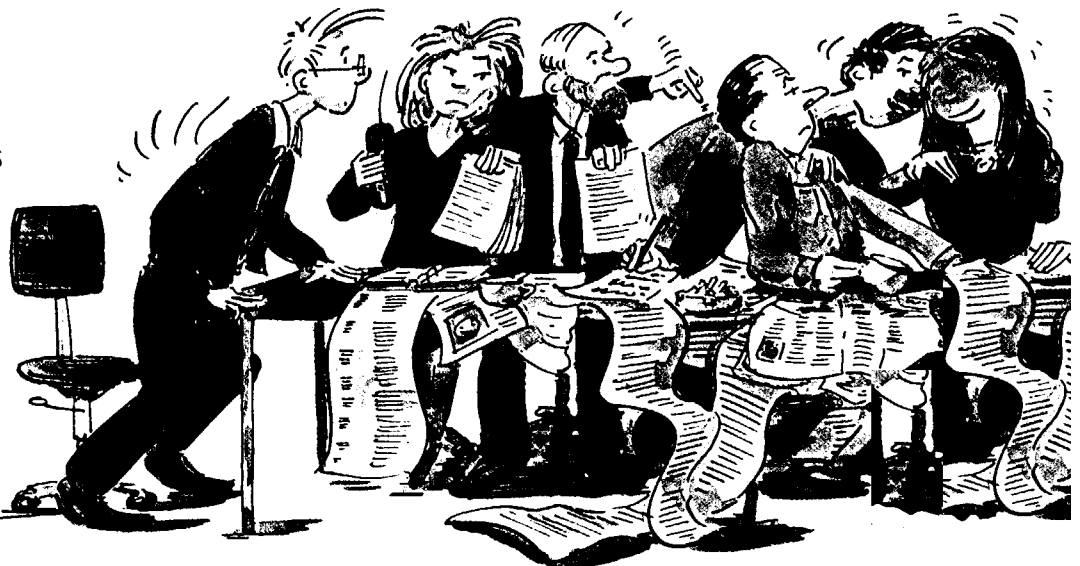
Methodology that combines media techniques with analysis of personal and communal media experiences

Since media have become the cultural context in which we form our religious identities and through which we experience faith, nourish it, and share it, no longer can media be considered simply instruments, tools. The fundamental question for training programs used to be "how do we use the media instruments to deliver the gospel message." That has changed. The question now is more complex and more formidable: "how is the faith to be inculturated in today's new media cultural context?"

MEDIA: TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

Media are both, technology and culture. This realization has been developing concomitantly in the US and Latin America for some time. It is the result of, on the one hand, academic research and, on the other, innovative practice.

One example of academic research is the sociological research study that was completed for OCIC-Chile in 1997 by an independent Chilean research center, CENECA.



Youth do indeed find spirituality in television

Religious programming is not spiritual

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The title of the research is "Youth, Spirituality and Television" and it focused on urban youth in Santiago. The purpose of the study was to obtain some preliminary data concerning this topic because up to now the prevalent opinion has been that television is harmful to youth, that violence and sex are harming their morals, etc.

The study found that youth do indeed find spirituality in television, but in some unexpected places. They find spirituality in sports, particularly football soccer where they report that they feel a sense of community and an emotional relationship, a "one-ness" with others in their own country. They also find spirituality in call-in television programs that give advice about personal problems to callers. These programs touch them deeply and addresses for them the ethical question: "how should I live."

Interestingly, they report that specifically religious programming is not spiritual because it does not enable participation nor does it enable a sense of community belonging. They find it predictable and not caring.

Similar findings are reported on the northern continent by Dr. Lynn Schofield Clark, author and researcher in the field of media and religion. Her ethnographic research with youth in the US state of Colorado provides ample evidence of the religious meanings which youth are constructing for themselves through popular music and certain television programs which they watch together in a type of peer-community ritual.

This research offers church training programs a way of helping catechists and religious educators. For example, in a series of workshops at Boston College, a Catholic University in the US, Dr. Mary Hess invites religious educators to study these research findings in order to gain a better understanding about how the youth form their religious identity today. How does the youth use symbols that are prevalent in popular culture and "regenerate" the symbols, infusing them with religious meaning? For a religious educator, it is imperative to understand the nature of the religious experience that his or her students are having in their daily lives. Only then can he or she guide those experiences and build bridges with the Catholic tradition that has been handed down to us.

In Latin America there are many examples of the shift in understanding stemming from innovative practice. One is the communications school, Diakonia, in Santa Cruz, Bolivia. As the training program of the Bolivian bishops conference, Diakonia offers a one-month summer media training program for lay pastoral agents, religious, priests and seminarians. The teaching faculty uses a methodology that combines media techniques with analysis of personal and communal media experiences.

For many of the students, it is the first opportunity to become self-aware about their own personal media experiences. Usually, their personal media experiences are so natural that they are taken for granted. By focusing on their own sensibilities and media practices, the priests, seminarians and other students can better the methodology that combines media techniques with analysis of personal and communal media experiences.

The Diakonia program still includes skill-building aspects like writing for radio and introductory video techniques, but these



are contextualized within a broader framework of media culture. This helps the pastoral agent explore how his/her ministry is to be inculturated and thus become a true leaven in society.

The shift from instrumentalism to inculturation places media production at the center of church life

MEDIA PRODUCTION

Far from minimizing its importance, the shift from instrumentalism to inculturation places media production at the center of church life, both within the praying community and in the broader media marketplace where the church lives out its public witness.

The fact that media production hardware and software are month-by-month becoming both less expensive and more accessible means that the church has opportunities not possible before. The problem to be addressed, however, is not a technological one. Rather, the problem is how to re-conceptualize the place of production within the church community. Again, a much more complex and formidable question.

The question has found a strong and optimistic response in the collaborative self-training workshops called *Creadores de Imágenes Cristianas*, where leading Latin American Catholic film and video producers polish their skills. Held annually, *Creadores de Imágenes Cristianas* provides, for experienced producers, a week-long workshop of viewing and reflection about current Catholic Latin American media production. During the workshop, the producers interact with each other about projects they are currently producing. During the sessions usually industry writers and directors participate in the reflections.

Creadores de Imágenes Cristianas provides, for experienced producers, a week-long workshop

What is evident in these workshops is that Latin American producers have known for some time that their productive work is not simply the use of technology for "message delivery." Media production is a "vital expression" of the Church. It is the action of the Holy Spirit who cries out "Abba" in prayer. In every age, both the church's liturgy and its public witness have been inculturated in material culture, in the media of the day: painting, architecture, the trill of the human voice, the melody of the musical instrument, incense and the written alphabet.

Media production is a "vital expression" of the Church

When seen in this context, media production acquires two important dimensions. First, it is necessarily rooted in community and second, it finds its strength in the sacramental and symbolic life.

Being rooted in the community is a dimension which has been tested and worked out at the video training and production center in Santo Domingo, *CEPA (Centro de Comunicación y Producción Audiovisual del Centro Bond)* where production begins and ends with community participation and celebration. After documentary videos are produced about issues important to local communities, they are shown outdoors on large screens in that same community. Clearly, the focus of this production training is to strive to be the vital expression of that Christian community.

At *CEPA* production begins and ends with community participation and celebration

The strength of sacrament and the symbolic life is being successfully used at *Diakonia* and other media training and production centers, where the emphasis is on metaphors and the symbolic world. During the summer media training sessions at *Diakonia*, students are asked to reflect upon, and be guided by, metaphors such as "the tree of life," "the creative will," and "the Trinity." In so doing, students get in touch with the rich sources of the Christian tradition but also with the religious imagination found in contemporary media culture. The result is a media production that has the relevance and power to deal with the fundamental religious quest of people today.

Students get in touch with the rich sources of the Christian tradition



CONCLUSION

The congruence that can be seen in both Latin American and US media training programs is a sign of hope that the church, as in every age, is intent upon the faithful inculturation of the Gospel in the media era. By taking advantage of academic research and innovative practice, new training programs are evolving which break down the traditional separation between media specialists and other ministries like religious education, liturgy and youth apostolate. It will be the continuing dialog and networking of north and south that will lead to ever more clear methods for moving from instrumentalism to inculturation.

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