

Evangelization of the Multimedia Culture

By Archbishop John P. Foley

My emphasis on evangelization results from several profound convictions:

Firstly, the most important task of Catholic communications efforts all over the world must be an enthusiastic response to the mandate of Jesus Christ: „Teach all nations“.

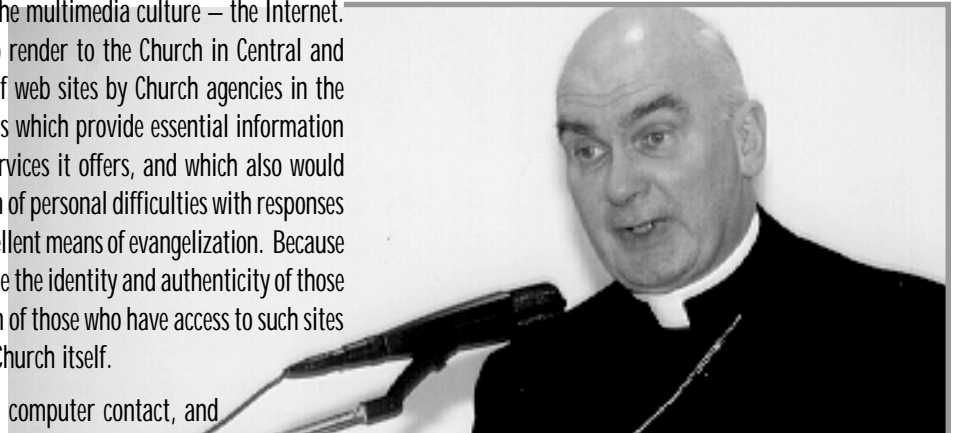
Secondly, the air waves and the printing presses are filled with the messages of many false prophets – whether they be the fundamentalists of many different religions or the seductive voices of materialism, consumerism and secularism, and we have only ourselves to blame if some succumb to the siren call of such false prophets if we have not offered, in the most attractive and convincing manner possible, the authentic Good News about Jesus, the Way, the Truth and the Life.

How is such evangelization to be done in the modern multimedia culture?

First, let us consider one of the newest technologies in the multimedia culture – the Internet. Especially for the service which you are called upon to render to the Church in Central and Eastern Europe, I would think that the development of web sites by Church agencies in the various languages of Central and Eastern Europe – sites which provide essential information about the Church, about its teaching and about the services it offers, and which also would provide opportunities to allow questions and a discussion of personal difficulties with responses by experienced priests or counselors – would offer an excellent means of evangelization. Because of the vast number of web sites, it is essential to guarantee the identity and authenticity of those sites offered in the name of the Church, for the protection of those who have access to such sites and indeed, for the protection of the reputation of the Church itself.

Young adults especially could be reached through such computer contact, and they could pursue their interest in the privacy of their own homes. It could be even better than door-to-door evangelization, because it goes directly to the person who is indeed the one who searches and does the inviting.

Such an interest, however, would not be restricted to Central and Eastern Europe. Latin America already has the presence of „la Red Informatica de la Iglesia in America Latina“ and many local or national home pages offered by the Catholic Church. In Asia, perhaps it would be helpful to offer web sites in the local languages; while English is widely used in Asia, the appeal of one's own language is always very great – and it offers a type of inculturation of the Church in the computer culture. In Africa, while I understand that the computer culture and the Internet are not as widespread as they are on other continents, we must help the Church to be ready – not only to offer services in English, French, Portuguese and Spanish, but also and perhaps especially in languages such as Swahili and other more widely spoken indigenous languages.



Archbishop John P. Foley, President of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications

A second priority, I am convinced, should be radio. The possibility of the Church or those associated with the Church receiving broadcast licenses has increased greatly. This is an opportunity which should not be missed. Radio brings an intimacy, a portability and a presence which no other medium can match.

Local Catholic radio stations, which offer an attractive format and authentic formation not only in the faith but also in the values which contribute to a strong and healthy society, can provide a real service in the formation of a sound community life.

I know that I personally hesitated to ask for assistance for a continent-wide short-wave station in Africa, because I thought that the continent and the local Churches of the continent would be better served by local radio stations broadcasting not only in the modern European languages of the former colonial powers but also and especially in local indigenous languages for which it would be impractical to use a continentwide station.

I am convinced, however, that sound formation and effective cooperation are needed in the development of Catholic radio.

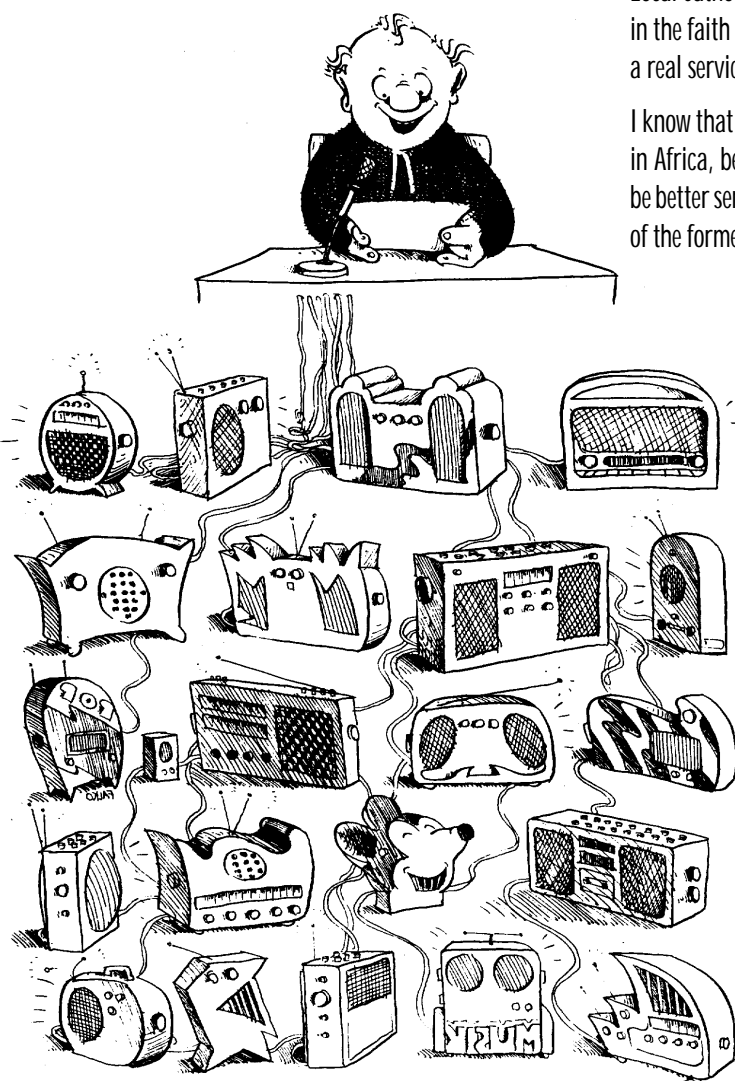
Thus, my third point will touch on sound formation programs. While excellent formation programs in communications and in philosophy, theology, history and spirituality exist in Rome and in some other European and American centres and while I can understand the need and desire to send those who will be professors of communications in the Church to such centres, I am convinced that it is ultimately in the best interest of nations and of local churches to have their communicators trained in local centres where there is an appreciation of the local culture and of the locally available means of communication.

For that reason, I rejoice in the development of such training centres in Africa, in Asia and in Latin-America – and I hope, that the centres themselves and the funding agencies recall that it is not enough to provide technical „know-how“, but also the „know-what“ and the „know-why“, that is, the theological, philosophical and historical education and the spiritual formation so much needed by those who would be Catholic communicators – and, thus, evangelizers.

Fourthly, I heard Msgr. Bernard Prince of the Pontifical Mission Societies say that his organizations receive very few requests for assistance for Catholic publications. As a former editor of a Catholic publication, I am not naive enough to think that

Catholic publications in the nations of Central and Eastern Europe and in the developing world are so successful, that they have no need of assistance. I do think that sometimes people forget the importance of the printed word, and – as I heard one bishop say in a Synod, citing Sacred Scripture – they go „lusting after images“ – that is, after the more „romantic“ media of communications such as television.

As a former editor and as president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, I have always said that the printed word, which has such a wonderful history in the Church, beginning with the Bible of Gutenberg, is invaluable as a means of information, formation, inspiration, continuing religious education and reinforced catholic identification. Also, „Scripta manent“ – the written word remains – to provide a means of reference, of consultation, of concrete and continuing contact with the Church and indeed with the word of God.



In the same context of the printed word, I would like to say a word in support of Catholic news agencies and their needs. Such agencies are the nervous system of Catholic publications, since they provide the news about the Church around the world and make it even clearer to the readers of the Catholic press, of both the universality and the unity of the Catholic Church and the significance of the Mystical Body of Christ.

Finally, I come to television – which certainly cannot be left unmentioned in a discussion of evangelization in a multimedia society.

Certainly, we know that in much of the world television has become a constant presence and that cultures are being formed and deformed as a result of television.

We also know that some western fundamentalist Christian televangelists have made significant inroads among Catholics in some areas of the world – but have also disillusioned many with their appeals for money and with their message that material prosperity is a consequence of religious faith. Thus, the Church must be present in television – but how?

Firstly I am convinced that there must be a continuing public relations effort by the Church involving television and indeed all forms of media so that the good things that the Church does in the name of the Lord might be better known.

Secondly, I am almost convinced that there should be a legal obligation for television and radio stations, since they use the public airwaves, to provide time to respond to the religious and spiritual needs of their viewers and listeners.

Thirdly, I am convinced that the Church, whose schools have made such excellent contributions in all societies, should consciously form the writers, directors and producers of television and radio programs and films so that that which we see and hear will be enriching, uplifting, inspiring and not degrading.

Finally, in overwhelmingly Catholic societies, if the television stations do not reflect the values of a Catholic society, then it would seem that there is a need for a Catholic alternative – a place in which Catholics can see programming which does not offend their sensibilities and which reinforces their values.

In those areas in which Catholics are in the minority, it would seem better to work with existing stations at least to be able to explain in a society which is not Catholic what Catholics believe and how they worship – not to engage in proselytism, but to promote understanding and social concord. In this, the ten-year-old document of our Council would be most useful: „Guidelines for Ecumenical and Interreligious Cooperation in Communications“.

The most important conviction all of us must have, however, is that, in evangelizing, in communicating the Good News of Jesus Christ, we must ourselves live that Good News and, as St. Francis de Sales so wisely said, „be reservoirs and not merely conduits“ of what we communicate.

Our credibility depends upon our own conversion and upon our own conviction, and the media are just that: media, means by which our lives transformed by the grace of Jesus Christ might reach and touch the hearts of others.

