

Society of St. Joseph (the Josephites) which was established in the nineteenth century to work with "Negroes." Phelps stated that Slattery anticipated several of the elements in our contemporary notion of inculturation in evangelization, particularly the importance of indigenous clergy and catechists. Indeed, it was Slattery who broke the color bar and opened U.S. seminaries to "Negro" candidates. At the same time, Slattery was a victim of the prevailing racist ideology of the nineteenth century. While Slattery did not assume that "Negroes" were inferior by nature, he did assume that they were inferior due to a lack of appropriate education and socialization.

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## COMMUNICATIONS AND THEOLOGY

### THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION AND COMMUNICATION STUDIES

Presenters: Paul A. Soukup, Santa Clara University  
Frances Forde Plude, Syracuse University  
Respondent: Paul J. Philibert, University of Notre Dame

"The very structures of theological discourse are so linked to the structures of communication that we cannot responsibly do theology without a careful consideration of the theories of communication." So summarized Philibert after presentations in which Soukup challenged the U.S. theological community to develop a distinctive approach to theology which seriously considers the mass media and in which Plude proposed that communications theories will impact theology much the same way as liberation and feminist studies have. "If we remain frozen in texts and hermeneutics, we will miss opportunities to communicate," Philibert said.

Soukup's paper on "Theological Reflection and Communication" argued that theologians should address contemporary communication products and processes as fully as their religious and academic forebears did the media of their eras (e.g., Augustine with rhetoric). If anything, the demand for such reflection grows with the increasing influence of communication on culture (the "chief means of information and education" for many according to John Paul II), especially in

North America. After exploring that influence, Soukup suggested three fruitful areas for reflection: (1) the culture and the inculturation of religious communication (as liberation theology grew from the experience of people in Latin America's oppressive culture, communications theology should grow from the experience of people in North America's communication culture); (2) how the Church should communicate today (by sharing information? by telling stories? by using mass media?); and (3) the ways in which different models of the Church lead to different communicative practices. Soukup observed that all Christians, communication professionals, and theologians, should carry out this reflection, each group according to its particular capacities. He concluded by sketching the possibilities for theologians moving from Scripture and theological concepts to communications and culture, and vice versa—through a rereading of the scriptures, through imaginative applications of theological categories (Incarnation, Trinity, etc.), and through the use of film and television as points of departure ("snapshots" of our world) for theological exploration.

Plude proposed that the "word" informs both theology and communication both as *content* and as vehicle of *transmission*. What happens when "the word" is altered—when the communication content and the transmission technologies change, as for example in the Incarnation? The introduction of printing clearly influenced both the rise of democratic thought and Reformation. Communications studies can help theologians and Church grasp and respond to the dramatic communication changes currently underway.

Plude surveyed six communication scholarship themes and trends generated by four decades of communication research: (1) linear message models, including message distortion; (2) propaganda studies and consciousness formation; (3) media agenda-setting, especially through "the news;" (4) media economics, the rise of information "gatekeepers" and public policy; (5) communication and culture formation through the telling of stories (anthropology); and (6) semiotics and linguistic analysis. Plude reflected especially on the impact of *new communication technologies* in promoting human *interaction* and *cooperative alliances*; and offered practical suggestions for theological inquiry to enrich the integration of theology and communication.

Plude especially argued that interactive, two-way technologies represent an epistemological turning point in communication research—moving from dyads to forums. She identified three specific effects of the interactive two-way communications revolution: (1) the flattening and decentralization of organizations; (2) the participatory character of communication flow with feedback loops, giving rise to "shared minds" within "forums;" and (3) the importance of access by all to the instruments of communication, enabling "power with" and reducing "power over." She proposed this "communication revolution" as a metaphor for a *communion* theology of Church (elaborated by her in *The Church and Communication*, Patrick Granfield, ed., Sheed & Ward, 1994). She finds links between these new-technology changes and theological texts in Newman, Congar,

Rahner, Lonergan, Dulles, Kasper, Schillebeeckx, Komonchak, and Häring. In her view, theologians and communicators must collaborate. The impact on theology will parallel that of liberation and feminist theories.

Philibert thanked Soukup and Plude for heightening our appreciation of the need for theological reflection upon the mass media. But now, he suggested, communications must enter into the work of theology itself, much as hermeneutics has done. Twenty years ago theologians were much engaged in addressing how hermeneutical questions would enter into theological discussion. CTSA's 1994 convention papers clearly demonstrate the fact that hermeneutics is integral to the way we now do theology. Developing the insights of Soukup and Plude, Philibert suggested imagination and ecclesiology as two key ways in which communications theory affects theology.

The epistemology of communications research persuades us that the role of the imagination is central to effective theologizing. Meaning detonates not in utterance, but in connections created beneath the surface of logical exchange. The archeology of human interests is mediated by symbols of relation, desire, and transcendence. Imagination is the vehicle of this symbolic exchange. The principal negative force of mass media in our culture is that it destabilizes a healthy ecology of symbolic integrity which should include silence, aesthetic subtlety, and critical evaluative perspectives that take account of the values of the distinct and varied communities within society. We are responsible for insisting upon the integrity of a healthy symbolic ecology of this kind.

Relative to ecclesiology, as Plude has shown, not only the idea of the Church but also the *reality* of the Church is at issue when one addresses how Gospel and moral tradition are mediated. The first principle of communicative responsibility is reciprocity. Cognitive developmental studies emphasize that moral maturity is rooted in cooperation and peer respect. So, for example, base communities are not only a formula for generating commitment, but also the best opportunity for the Church to establish realistic contexts in which some evaluation and critique of the mass culture can become effectively expressed in the ordinary lives of Christian people in our society.

During discussion, Richard Liddy (Seton Hall) affirmed the need to integrate new technologies as students have become incapable of reading a book. Yet we must enable our symbols to detonate in their hearts and relationships, occasioning conversion. Fred Jelly (St. Mary's, Emmitsburg) concurred, evoking Harvey Cox's "postliterate era" in commenting that there is an explosion of books, but the more intelligent students will not read! Liddy worried that we may lose something in moving into the world of new technologies.

Kenneth Steinhauser (St. Louis), picking up on Plude's original observation that the Incarnation drastically changed the "technology" of God's communication with us, reminded all of the move from scroll to codex and its impact on theology. While such changes of form do affect content, tradition lives through such transitions. The codex, books organized into chapters, and hierarchical

society are interrelated. Theologians (content specialists) and communicators (form specialists) must collaborate if the gospel is to be inculturated in our era as in prior ones.

Jane Redmont (Harvard) shared her sense of TV as the enemy of the printed and written word, which she honors as "holy." Cecilia Ranger (Maryhurst College) observed that the Great Northwest is highly unchurched but heavily computerized, and modem-ized into electronic bulletin boards. We must use these new "meeting places" to get the gospel to such persons as single parents who cannot come to classes because they cannot get or afford a babysitter. Perhaps such electronic gatherings are forms of *ek-klesia*, calling people out and together.

Pat Parachini reflected that we are not communicating with people effectively. We must learn to meet people "where they are," and many of them are given to images. Mary Kay Oosdyke (Ursuline College, Cleveland) responded to the importance of interactive communications, expressing concern that as Church we do this poorly—for instance in the interactive parts of liturgy.

Those present affirmed a desire to continue probing the interplay of theology and communications. The focus is "communications theology" rather than "theology of mass media." CTSA is an important forum for carrying such exploration forward, and several expressed the hope that the issue might get before the whole Society. Ladislaus Orsy (Catholic University of America) noted that CTSA meets for only two days a year, so institutions must carry this work forward. Peter Dirr (CTNA) proposed using the media to move ahead, perhaps setting up an electronic meeting for theologians and communicators.

This workshop started from the conviction that communications needs theology to mature as a ministry in the Church. It concluded with the strong conviction, succinctly captured by Philibert above, that theology needs communication to be responsibly done in our communications culture. CTSA remains an appropriate forum for pursuing the blend.

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