

THEOLOGY OF COMMUNICATIONS

Aetatis novae (1992) calls for "ongoing theological reflection upon the processes and instruments of social communication and their role in the Church and society" (#32,c). The CTSA's sister organization for broadcast communicators, Unda-USA, requested this workshop. Unda-USA First Vice President Bob Bonnot moderated the discussion. Panelists included Richard Liddy (Seton Hall University), Peter Drilling (Christ the King Seminary), Celia Ann Cavazos (Diocese of San Antonio catechist), and, via a contributed paper, Frances Ford Plude (Newhouse School, Syracuse University).

Bonnot, noting that the convention fell between Trinity Sunday and Corpus Christi, observed that communications is rooted theologically in trinitarian *communio* and the Incarnation. Lonergan's functional specialties and the dominance of mass communications processes in American culture provide further context.

Liddy shared Lonergan's conviction that without communications the other specialties in theology (research, interpretation, history, dialectic, foundations, doctrines, systematics) are "in vain, for they fail to mature." Likewise, communications "will bear no fruit" without the other specialties. For Lonergan "communications" refers to the whole area of pastoral theology. It is the endeavor to hear the Word of God out of the conflicts of the past so that we can truly communicate God's Word in the present and for the future.

Lonergan ties communications closely to conversion. When someone talks or writes "over your head" conversion is necessary, for conversion grounds the common meaning which, through communication, constitutes human community. Intellectual conversion is especially important. It even enables one to understand "simple people" better and what their difficulties in understanding might be. Liddy exemplified such conversion in terms of "church." The unconverted see church as a "society," a "body" "out there" while the converted grasp "church" as "a community . . . constituting itself through the communication of a particular message, 'the outer communication of Christ's message and . . . the inner gift of God's love'" (*Method in Theology*, 361-63).

In chapter 14 of *Method in Theology*, Lonergan relates the communications process by which the Church continually reconstitutes herself to the wider process by which human society constitutes itself. He argues that theology's grasp of what is taking place in the Church must link up with other disciplines which study what is taking place beyond the Church.

Plude confirmed the need to link theology with other disciplines, including her own which studies communications processes in different cultures and the varied ways codes of meaning are expressed. Great progress has been made in this field as in theology. Plude asserted the need to move beyond "a theology of communications" or "theology and communication" to "communication theology," as in "liberation theology" or "feminist theology." Theologians need to discover communication realities within theology itself and theological realities within contemporary communications processes. She expressed appreciation for the work of Dulles (*The Reshaping of Catholicism*, ch. 7), of Haring (his analysis of the impact of mass media in *Free and Faithful in Christ*), for Tracy's explorations of "public discourse," and for Soukup's review of the literature (*Communication and Theology*, 1983).

Plude challenged theologians to identify communication concepts within the theology of Trinity, Scripture, and sacraments. She asked how modern communication technologies alter human communication modes and thus impact the search for religious meaning and its expression. She pondered the role of "public discourse" in theology.

Drilling translated Lonergan's notion that Church labors "to persuade people to intellectual, moral, and religious conversion" (*Method*, 361) into more relational, interpersonal, and communicative terms. He proposed that the objective of Christian ministry is "to invite persons, individually and communally to communion and conversation"—with God and with others.

Drilling distinguished Christian ministry (Rahner's "pastoral theology," Lonergan's "communications") in terms of word, sacrament, and care: *ministry of word* initiates and promotes divine-human *conversation* (interpersonal, intimate, truthful, responsible and loving); *ministry of sacrament* initiates, promotes and restores divine-human *communion* (a sense of belonging to one another, being at home with one another, sharing intimate, creative and healing life); *ministry of care* creates the *conditions* for ministry of word and sacrament.

Drilling traced how the ground of Christian ministry moved from power to communication. Earlier ministry was grounded in the juridical notions of power (of orders or of jurisdiction). Pius XII grounded ministerial action in the more theological notion of the Mystical Body of Christ (*Mystici Corporis*). Vatican II (*Lumen Gentium*) grounds ministry in the self-communicative activity of the divine, Trinitarian communion of persons. In this theology, the Church is a people consisting of equal persons with diverse gifts but all united through mutual self-giving, thus made one with the unity of the Trinity itself. This mutually self-communicating people constitutes a sacramental presence of Jesus in the world, ministering through word, sacrament and care to enable Church to enter into communion and conversation with the triune God and one another, thereby beginning a world order constituted by communion and conversation. Communication is at the heart of God, of Church, of ministry, of world.

Cavazos explored catechetics as a case study of how theology matures in communications. Catechesis examines the meaning and value of everything created, including the products of human efforts, to show how it illumines the mystery of God and is illumined by God's Word. But catechesis must also adapt to the age, culture and individual needs of particular audiences if it wants not to "go over their heads," but rather to get through and convert persons.

Cavazos presented catechesis as the "resounding" or "echoing back" of the Divine Word as it penetrates human life. She sketched several criteria of catechesis: it must be trinitarian and christocentric; it must communicate the message in its entirety; it must adapt to the circumstances of those being catechized; it must interpret present life or experience in the light of revelation. She noted the historical use of communication media in catechesis. Contemporary media occasions an "event," concretizing concepts and enabling a shared experience which bonds persons and gives rise to symbols which evoke the experience for still others. Thus the image or symbol of Our Lady of Guadalupe grounds a deep, strong, steadfast, nonclerical faith and a less institutional/more communitarian Church, drawing persons to creative service and missionary responses. Similarly, the movie *Brother Sun, Sister Moon* enables young adults who could not speak doctrinally about "sin" to name obstacles to their living the Gospel message. Today's media culture requires that catechesis and theology move beyond an argumentative modality which appeals mainly to the mind toward the symbolic media environment which engages persons more fully. This need is urgent—we have no choice if we are to develop ministries adequate to our mission of passing on the faith to current generations.

Edmund Arens (Frankfurt) observed that German culture is not yet dominated by electronic media, but noted Habermas' emphasis on parables as symbolic action with a cognitive dimension. Mary Marrocco (Ontario) expressed the frustration of attempting to catechize baptized persons who have never been converted, endorsing the need for communicative theology which converts persons. Charles Moutenot (Fordham) confirmed the impact of media on catechesis in the Bronx. Bishop Joseph Galante (San Antonio) argued that Catholics must learn to use the media more effectively to present the one who calls us to conversion and enables us to enter communion and conversation—Jesus.

There is need for "ongoing theological reflection" on communication and CTSA is an apt locale for the effort.

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