

PASTORAL PLAN FOR CHURCH COMMUNICATION

United States Catholic Conference
1997

Introduction

Communication and community lie at the heart of the Church's mission because God's self-revelation draws every believer into the faith community. After the family, people experience the Church first in the local parish, where bonds of charity begin and where the worshipping community takes shape. This occurs through communication: the sharing of faith, the preaching of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments, service to the poor and marginalized, and the union of the larger body. All church communication—even her technologically or mass-mediated communication—should flow from the foundation of God's self-revelation. Human communication in the Church mirrors the communication of the Trinity, the Divine community, in whom we discover the fullness of communion and communication.

The Church, formed by the Word of God, nourished by that Word, and given life by the Spirit, seeks through her communication to make real the desire for communion, the formation of community, the proclamation of God's word, and the voice of God's little ones. She recognizes that modern society increasingly defines itself by communication—newspapers, magazines, books, telecommunications, radio, television, film, electronic mail, digital media—and, mindful of Christ's command that she preach the Gospel to the ends of the earth (Mt 28:19), asks once again how she can image and echo God in this world.

In her formal reflections, the Church has long acknowledged that communication media have a role in fostering community and in spreading the Gospel. "The media of social communication can contribute a great deal to human unity" (*Communio et Progressio*, 9). "The Church would feel guilty before the Lord if she did not utilize these powerful means that human skill is daily rendering more perfect. It is through them that she proclaims 'from the housetops' the message of which she is the depositary" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45). "Since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church's authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the 'new culture' created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the 'new culture' originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques, and a new psychology" (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37).

Such communication becomes all the more urgent in the United States today with its variety of cultures and socioeconomic levels, its debates over public communication, and its powerful communication environment. Despite all the advantages this country enjoys, the United States has become a culture that diminishes the importance of faith. Many need to hear the word of God; believers need to encourage one another in their faith. As an institution and as individuals, the Church and her members must communicate their faith: Communication does not lie on the

periphery of the Church; rather, “communication must lie at the heart of the church community” (*Aetatis Novae*, 6). In an essential way, it characterizes the Church and her activities (*Communio et Progressio*, 114). Whether spontaneously or deliberately, every part of the Church communicates.

While no one administrative agency can control or dictate this communication, the Committee on Communications of the United States Catholic Conference, responding to *Aetatis Novae*, accepts the charge of providing an overall plan for the use of the mass media of print, video, film, radio, television, cable, as well as new media and new technologies by the Church. The Church can and must use these media to promote community and parish life, spiritual growth, the proclamation of the Gospel, and Church participation in the life of our nation.

Our Goals

Although it is up to diocesan pastoral communication plans to spell out local goals, this national pastoral communication plan recognizes that it is in our parishes that the Church most directly communicates with her people, especially through God's word proclaimed in the liturgy and through a variety of educational programs. In this context of pastoral planning, church communication supports the mission of the Church universal and in the United States of America. More specifically, the bishops have directed that church communication in the United States present Christ's message through participation in media locally and nationally.

This overarching goal leads to seven more specific actions: (1) evangelizing; (2) influencing the values, judgments, and actions of U.S. society; (3) telling the Church's story; (4) protecting the communication environment; (5) teaching communication; (6) reflecting systematically on the quality of church communication; and (7) supporting one another in a ministry of communication.

Before discussing these actions in more detail, let us briefly review the resources and limitations that the Church brings to communication, the audiences it wishes to reach, and some general guidelines to follow.

Resources

The overall process of pastoral and communication planning incorporated a survey of the communication resources of the Church in the United States. In summary, there is a wealth of resources that the Church brings to her communication efforts. These include people, finances, structures, and programming. The sophistication and ready availability of the secular communication industry provides still further resources.

People: Thousands of Catholics in the United States work in communication-related areas; many work directly for the Church's communication efforts. These include diocesan and state conference directors of communication, Catholic press and media officers, members of religious communities that promote or sponsor communication activities, and employees of independent Catholic publishers and production companies.

Finances: American Catholics generously support the Catholic Communication Campaign. In addition, they also subscribe to religious newspapers and periodicals; buy religious books, recordings, materials prepared for CD-ROM, and videos; and directly contribute to other church communication enterprises. Regular budget allocation is another source of communication funding as are grants from foundations.

Structures: The Church relies on several overlapping structures of communication: the United States Catholic Conference's Department of Communications and the diocesan communication offices; special apostolates of religious congregations; professional organizations and trade associations; a publication and production industry; and distribution systems, including cable outlets and Instructional Television systems. Other church structures, particularly parishes and schools, also serve communication functions.

Programming: These organizations and offices publish newspapers, magazines, and religious books; produce television and radio programs; and publish digital information. For example, a large number of dioceses have regularly scheduled programming on local radio, broadcast television, and cable systems; and the USCC places a documentary each year on two national networks under an interfaith arrangement.

The Communication Industry: Catholic laity have played an important role in the arts, literature, film, and television. They work in every aspect of communications, providing a valuable resource for the Church. In addition, the news media often cover the Church or come to church representatives, seeking a religious perspective on current events. Entertainment, educational, and cultural programming features the Church, and its producers often ask help from the Church. For many communication professionals, the Catholic Church and her institutions represent organized religion and a voice of moral authority. This is a resource whose value cannot be overlooked.

Challenges and Limitations

Church communications also face challenges and limitations. Church representatives, for example, do not have control over how the secular media portray the Church. Of great interest to many in the media, the Church is, for others, only one voice among many. Some, who are actively hostile, make Church teaching an object of attack or ridicule. Still others see the Church merely as a stereotype of the large institution, to be treated with the skepticism that all such institutions seem to receive in our society. Even Catholic media can project conflicting ideologies which sometimes leave the Church's teaching barely discernible, let alone communicable. Other limitations include the inherent difficulty of adequately conveying complex church teaching and policy in a culture that has become accustomed to the sound bite. An equally complex church structure of overlapping national and local responsibilities can result in a lack of coordination of communication efforts. Finally, financial limitations make it difficult to compete in the expensive world of American media. Even the Catholic Communication Campaign Collection can provide funding for only a handful of projects.

Audiences

The communication of the Church targets two audiences: Catholics, both active and inactive, and the general public. Each of these divides into a number of more specific audiences. The "active Catholics" audience consists of various groupings of Catholics, for example, diverse language groups, the young and old, married and single, rural and urban, and so on. The nonpracticing Catholic audience consists of those baptized who do not participate in the life of the Church as well as those alienated from the Church. The general public similarly consists of many groups; those of particular interest to the Church are children, young people, various cultural groups, the marginalized, the homebound, and nonbelievers. In addition, the Church seeks to reach elected and appointed government officials, communication and academic professionals, and those who influence public opinion through editorial comments, news programming and other media decision making.

Some General Guidelines

While a planning document such as this cannot address every situation, it can identify some general guidelines for church communication.

1. The message and the audience come first; Church communicators should consciously and intelligently choose media appropriate for each message and audience.
2. Cooperation is vital; church communicators must coordinate their efforts across administrative areas in the USCC or diocesan offices (evangelization, education, refugees, etc.), across regions, across media, and even across religious lines. They should, for example, coordinate national, local, and interfaith efforts when possible.
3. Innovation and flexibility must mark church communication; church communicators must use new technologies as they emerge as well as established ones. They should also never hesitate to use commercial media or to reach out to communication industry professionals by providing them with access to church information, supporting their efforts, consulting their expertise, and developing alliances with them where appropriate.
4. Research must become an integral component of church communication efforts; major or ongoing projects should have, for example, audience analysis and marketing or promotion plans.
5. Each project and each communication unit should have explicit performance goals and be evaluated in light of its goals.

Action Toward Our Goals

To meet the goals of Catholic communication, the seven actions mentioned previously should be used. Because no plan can meet every eventuality, the USCC Committee on Communications must evaluate each of these and the component strategies described below every other year.

These actions will incorporate the following means: increasing the Catholic Communication Campaign revenues; embracing new communication technologies; creating national radio and television programming; training church leaders to interact better with the media; building on successful efforts; and promoting better national and local collaboration. Local and national strategies and actions should support one another. Both national and local communication offices should evaluate and disseminate the results of their efforts.

The more specific strategies listed next point out ways to accomplish these goals and actions.

1 *Evangelizing* proclaims the gospel message to nonbeliever and believer alike: It awakens faith in the Good News of Jesus Christ in those who do not know him and strengthens the faith of those who believe. This direct evangelization takes place in a world shaped by the means, culture, and "language" of mass communication. This evangelization relies on God's word and the teaching of the Church, especially as articulated in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. The apostolic letter *Evangelii Nuntiandi* has described the process of evangelization as the proclamation of the name of Jesus Christ and his liberating message of salvation. An evangelizing spirit in communications reflects the "profound link between Christ, the Church, and evangelization" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 16) and transforms our culture by telling personal stories of God's actions in our lives.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Collaborating with other church offices to produce programming.
- Keeping up-to-date with research into the effects of the "language of mass communication" on belief; where this research is lacking, sponsoring it as part of communication planning.
- Exploring ways to counteract negative effects of the mass media.
- Using the commercial media, as appropriate, to publicize evangelization programs.
- Cooperating in ecumenical efforts to preach the Gospel.
- Planning television, radio, and newspaper spots to support evangelization.
- Providing materials in the several languages of the United States.
- Providing materials on church teaching at reasonable costs.
- Encouraging religious publishing houses to make Catholic materials more readily and more widely available.
- Providing content on the Internet that serves as an evangelization tool.

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Making parishes the primary site for evangelization and supporting their efforts with materials and training.
- Providing information on church teaching to parishes and individuals with the *Catechism*

of the Catholic Church as a primary and contemporary source.

- Keeping informed about and cooperating in regional evangelization activities.
- Using local or regional media.
- Encouraging new creative ways to reach marginalized people and different ethnic and racial groups.

2 Her call to evangelize and her prophetic mission lead the Church to seek to *influence the values, judgments, and actions of U.S. society*. In this way, the Church invites people to a public dialogue of faith and strives to create an atmosphere conducive to Christian living for all members of Christian churches living in the United States. She proclaims the dignity and transcendence of the human person as an individual and in community.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Studying and disseminating research on understanding how individuals and the communication media influence American society.
- Identifying audiences (e.g., legislators, media professionals) and targeting messages to them in support of the moral values.
- Reaching out to communication industry professionals, both with information and with spiritual formation programs.
- Intensifying national advertising/public service campaigns to promote positive values reflecting the Gospel.
- Continuing to provide easily accessible information on the moral qualities of films and television programs.
- Using a variety of technologies, both traditional (print, radio, and television) and newer (computer-based) to reach specific groups, especially those usually untouched by Church communication.
- Developing an awareness of key issues among editors and news directors by providing briefings, background, and so on.

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Participating in national efforts to influence policy debates through contacts with key figures (members of Congress, local officials, etc.).
- Publishing columns by bishops in their diocesan newspapers and facilitating their appearances in electronic media as part of their role as teachers of the faith.
- Sponsoring opportunities for dialogue with community members and community leaders.
- Developing local community leaders' knowledge of key issues.
- Using diocesan publications and other media outlets to set out church teachings.

3 The Church's communication efforts also involve *telling the Church's story*, interpreting the events and structures of the world, and maintaining good public relations by providing accurate information and news of the Church.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Providing a comprehensive media office for national issues, whose responsibilities may include assisting Conference members in responding to issues, identifying and training

additional spokespeople, and developing crisis communications plans.

- Working to develop knowledge of the Church among key media figures (writers, editors, reporters, entertainment industry people) in order to disseminate more informed comment about the Church.
- Circulating informed comment on national and international issues.
- Developing a fully interactive Internet presence to build an online Catholic community, to provide materials about the Church, and to maintain links to diocesan and international Catholic sites.
- Establishing preparation courses for training church communicators.

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Having a local media office or contact person.
- Linking existing diocesan Internet Web sites to the NCCB site and encouraging development of new diocesan Web sites; using these sites to disseminate information from the Conference.
- Making information available and providing ready access to church representatives for journalists and opinion leaders.
- Sponsoring local events to develop knowledge of the local Church among key media personnel.
- Using the Catholic press and media outlets as key resources for both media contact and for disseminating information to Catholics.
- Establishing an advisory board of local professionals in order to forge closer links to the local media.
- Preparing a local handbook and directory of media contacts.
- Sponsoring educational seminars to help local media professionals understand the Church.

4 Church communication activity *acts as an advocate for the larger social and cultural communication environment* through national and state legislative and regulatory activities, pursuing an agenda informed by moral, religious, and civil rights and obligations. The Church represents the interests of all the public, particularly those who are voiceless and powerless in a majoritarian society (e.g., the unborn, children, and the disabled and the dying), by fostering program development and encouraging wider discussion of issues. The Church participates in state and federal proceedings to help develop regulations and statutes that promote diversity of voices in all regulated media of mass communication. Church communicators encourage local and federal government to prevent economic and legal monopolies of the sources and means of dissemination of information and entertainment. Following *Communio et Progressio*, church communicators promote government action to foster the rights of all Americans to receive and disseminate opinion and information—rights consistent with the First Amendment. Church communication also takes an interest in international issues, particularly those in which the U.S. communication industry or government policy affects the global communication environment.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Identifying key communication issues—such as respect for life, respect for all human

beings, access to information, limitations on pornography, protection of children, religious freedom, and the sanctity of the family.

- Joining with other religious groups to work for these issues—those identified in the first item—through education, lobbying, and information campaigns.
- Annually reviewing key issues in the light of governmental and technological developments and updating the campaign to support them.

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Reviewing the communication environment in the local region (if more than one diocese lies in a given media market, doing this collaboratively).
- Choosing local issues and developing an action plan to influence people and government agencies.
- Supporting the national legislative and regulatory agenda locally.

5 The Church also *teaches communication*. On the one hand, this flows from a concern for the media environment through media education programs, which complement actions focused on the industry with those focused on the viewer. On the other hand, media training prepares bishops and other leaders to deal with the communications media with more confidence while preparing women and men for communication work in the Church as well as in the industry.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Fostering media education through collaborative work with international church groups, national and local agencies, and interreligious groups.
- Providing materials for Catholic families about the media.
- Encouraging Catholic schools and universities to include training or degree courses in communication.
- Training in critical evaluation of media across the curriculum.
- Providing a guide to the interpersonal and media skills suited to ministry in the Church and parish community.
- Providing training for bishops and other leaders so that they can more effectively represent the Church in the mass media.

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Integrating communication skills in diocesan training programs.
- Making computerized information readily accessible in order to address the gap between the literate and illiterate, the passive and active users of media.
- Encouraging Catholic schools and religious education programs to integrate media education as a means to help children understand the media environment of faith.

6 The Church *reflects* systematically on her own communication by engaging in research and theological reflection. Basic research addresses issues as diverse as audience and marketing studies, communication styles, program effectiveness, and program evaluation. Theological reflection acknowledges that God alone is the creator, source, and model of communication—God, the Father, whose Word creates all things; God, the Incarnate Word, who

restores communication, reconciling all people to the Father and to one another; God the Spirit forms a communion among people. Such reflection leads church communicators to model more deeply their work on God's creating Word.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Providing ongoing funding for audience studies and marketing research for communication efforts.
- Providing a clearinghouse of research information for all Catholic communication efforts, whether church-sponsored or independent.
- Setting a communication research agenda and inviting Catholic universities to help pursue it.
- Providing various outlets and symposia to support theological dialogue and reflection on communication and disseminating their deliberations.
- Promoting reflection on a *communio* model for church communication. In such a model, communication helps us to become a Church according to the renewal of the Second Vatican Council, whose documents stress the formation of a People of God—interacting to form community; engaged in a dialogue with the world; and growing in faith, hope, and love.

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Including some level of research in ongoing communication efforts.
- Inviting local and regional Catholic institutions of higher learning to participate in research, interdisciplinary dialogue, and theological reflection on communication.
- Including theological reflection on communication and a consideration of the communication aspects of theology as part of education for ministry in local seminaries.
- Using diocesan events—congresses, institutes—to offer parents and educators a forum to give input on church communication efforts.

7 Church communication also *supports the Church herself*. The regular administration of an organization as complex as the Church requires sophisticated communication. Support means facilitating the work of various national and diocesan offices of communication, as well as other national and local offices: evangelization, catechetics, pastoral ministry, and so forth. Support reaches the individual believer by providing the means to share a common faith story. Communication support must apply in a particular way to those Catholics who work within the communication industry and have both an ongoing and a greater chance of influencing it and, through it, society. Furthermore, communication supports the universal Church by providing news about the Church to the news media, by providing news to church members, by linking Catholics, and sometimes by financial and public policy support for communication projects.

Elements of a national strategy:

- Increasing the annual Catholic Communication Campaign Collection.
- Developing collaborative relationships with other church offices and coordinating communication planning.
- Providing useful support and resources (both financial and otherwise) to local and

regional communication projects.

- Establishing an ongoing consulting group available to work with these projects.
- Developing a model of communication as a ministry for the Church.
- Developing a model for the integration of new communication technologies into church communication.
- Inviting dioceses to share Internet expertise with other local or regional groups who wish to use these technologies.
- Providing leadership through experimentation with different models of church communication (computer-based, radio, instructional television, document distribution, etc.).

Elements of a diocesan strategy:

- Maintaining a communication office and integrating it with other diocesan offices.
- Developing a model of how the communication office can better interact with and support other diocesan offices or parish-based programs.
- Encouraging greater dialogue among members of the diocese.
- Increasing the use of technologies (e.g., the fax machine, computer networks) to integrate parishes more closely with the diocese.
- Providing outreach and support to Catholics in the local communication industry through retreats, discussion groups, or other programs.
- Providing preparation and religious training programs for church communicators.

Conclusion

This overall plan is a general one and needs to be adapted at each level, but it points out some ways in which church communicators can respond to the increasingly complex communication situation in the United States today. The whole Church desires to hear the Gospel and is called to share it with others. Recalling the Church's teaching that "Communication in and by the Church is essentially communication of the Good News of Jesus Christ" (*Aetatis Novae* 9), and within the framework of the goals outlined above, we affirm the urgency of this task.

Principles for Church Communication

Church documents dealing with communication have already specified a number of principles that should guide Church efforts in communication.

- The model for all church communication arises from the communion of God in the Trinity and urges us to foster human communion (*Communio et Progressio*, 8).
- A public dialogue of faith characterizes church communication (*In the Sight of All*, 2).
- Church communication should support dialogue wherever possible (*Communio et Progressio*, 115_125).
- Communication is connected to the nature of the church and to human community (*Aetatis Novae*, 6; *Communio et Progressio*, 92).
- The Church must tell the truth in a timely fashion and is accountable for doing so (*Communio et Progressio*, 123).
- The communication of truth can have redemptive power (*Aetatis Novae*, 6).
- The Church should be present in all areas of the communication world (*Aetatis Novae*, 17, *Inter Mirifica*, 3) and to all people (*Communio et Progressio*, 24).
- The Church should foster multiple but complementary approaches to communication through sharing resources, collaborating with others (both within the Church and interreligiously). Cooperation and collaboration should characterize church work in communication (*Communio et Progressio*, 84_99).
- The Church should take the side of the oppressed and marginalized (*Aetatis Novae*, 13, *Communio et Progressio*, 92_95).
- Communication must be judged by its contribution to the common good (*Communio et Progressio*, 16).

The Pastoral Plan for Church Communication, prepared by the Committee on Communications, was approved by the USCC Administrative Board in March 1997 for presentation to the full membership of the United States Catholic Conference in June 1997. *The Pastoral Plan for Church Communication* was unanimously approved by a voice vote at the meeting and is authorized for publication by the undersigned.

Msgr. Dennis M. Schnurr, General Secretary, NCCB/USCC

Copyright © 1997, United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, Inc., Washington, D.C. All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the copyright.

The Pastoral Plan for Church Communication is available in a print edition and may be ordered by telephoning (800) 235-8722. Ask for publication number 5-141.