



The Holy See

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS BENEDICT XVI
TO PARTICIPANTS IN THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY
OF THE PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS**

*Clementine Hall
Monday, 28 February 2011*

*Your Eminences,
Your Excellencies,
Dear Brothers and Sisters,*

I am pleased to greet you on the occasion of the dicastery's Plenary Assembly. I greet the President, Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, whom I thank for his courteous words, and the Secretaries, the Officials, the Consultors and all the Personnel.

In this year's [Message for the World Day of Social Communications](#) I asked the faithful to reflect on the fact that new technologies are not only changing the world of communication but are also bringing about a vast cultural transformation. A new way of learning and thinking is developing, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.

I would now like to reflect on the fact that thought and relation are always in the modality of language, meant of course in the broad sense, not only verbal. Language is not merely an interchangeable and temporary veneer; rather, it is the living, pulsating context in which human thoughts, anxieties and projects come to life and are patterned in gestures, symbols and words. The human being, therefore, does not only "use" but, in a certain sense, "dwells" in language.

Today, in particular, what the [Second Vatican Council](#) described as "marvellous technical inventions" (*Inter mirifica*, n. 1) are transforming the cultural environment and this requires specific attention to the languages that are developing in it.

The power of the new technologies “extends to defining not only what people will think but even what they will think about” (*Aetatis Novae*, n. 4). The new languages developing in digital communications determine among other things an intuitive and emotive rather than analytical ability, they are geared to a different logical organization of thought and of the relationship with reality, they frequently give priority to the image and to hypertextual connections. Then the traditional clear distinction between written and oral language seems to fade, giving way to written communication that takes the form and immediacy of the spoken word.

The dynamics proper to “participatory networks” further require that the person be involved in what he or she communicates. When people exchange information, they are already sharing themselves and their vision of the world: they become “witnesses” of what gives their life meaning.

The risks that are taken are of course visible to everyone; the loss of interiority, superficiality in living out relationships, escape into emotionality, the prevalence of the most convincing opinion over the desire for truth. Yet, these risks are the consequences of an inability to experience fully and authentically the meaning of the innovations. For this reason reflection on the languages developed by the new technologies is urgently necessary.

The starting point is the Revelation which bears witness to us of how, until his full manifestation of self in the Incarnate Son, God communicated his marvels precisely through language and the real experience of human beings, “according to the culture proper to each age” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 58).

Faith never fails to penetrate, enrich, exalt and invigorate culture; and culture, in its turn, becomes a vehicle of faith to which it offers the language for thinking and expressing itself. Hence, if we are to be attentive to God’s work in the world, we must listen attentively to the language of the people of our time.

In this context the work the Pontifical Council for Social Communications carries out in deepening the knowledge of “digital culture” is important. It stimulates and sustains reflection for a greater awareness of the challenges that lie in store for the ecclesial and civil communities. It is not only a matter of expressing the Gospel message in contemporary language; it is also necessary to have the courage to think more deeply — as happened in other epochs — about the relationship between faith, the life of the Church and the changes human beings are experiencing.

It is also the commitment to helping all those who have responsibilities in the Church to understand, interpret and speak the “new language” of the media in their pastoral duties (*cf. Aetatis Novae*, n. 2) and in dialogue with the contemporary world, asking themselves: what challenges does “digital thought” pose to faith and theology? What questions and requests?

The world of communications involves the entire cultural, social and spiritual universe of the

human person. If the new languages have an impact on the way of thinking and living, this in some way also concerns the world of faith and the understanding and expression of it. According to a classical definition theology means the understanding of faith and we know well that understanding, perceived as reflective and critical knowledge, is not alien to the cultural changes that are under way.

The digital culture presents new challenges to our ability to speak and listen to a symbolic language that talks about transcendence. In proclaiming the Kingdom Jesus himself knew how to use elements of the culture and environment of his time: the flock, tents, the banquet, seeds, and so forth. Today we are called to discover also in the digital culture symbols and metaphors which are meaningful to people and can be of help in talking about the Kingdom of God to contemporary man.

The fact that communication in the times of the “new media” entails an ever more usual relationship between the human being and machines, from the computer to cell phones, to mention only the most common, is also food for thought. What will be the effects of this constant relationship?

In former times Pope Paul vi, referring to the first plans for the automation of the linguistic analysis of the biblical text, pointed out a track for reflection when he asked himself: “Is not this effort to imbue in mechanical instruments the reflection of spiritual duties, ennobled and uplifted to a service which touches the sacred? Is it the spirit which is made a prisoner of matter or is it matter, already tamed and obliged to carry out laws of the spirit, which perhaps offers sublime deference to the spirit itself?” (*Address at the Automation Centre of the Aloisianum, Gallarate, 19 June 1964*). It is possible to discern in these words the profound link with the human spirit to which technology is called by vocation (*cf. Encyclical [Caritas in Veritate, n. 69](#)*).

It is precisely the appeal to spiritual values that will make it possible to promote communication that is truly human: over and above every facile form of enthusiasm or scepticism, we know that it is a response to the call impressed upon our nature as beings created in the image and likeness of the God of communion.

For this reason biblical communion in accordance with God’s will is always linked to dialogue and to responsibility as, for example, the figures of Abraham, Moses, Job and the Prophets testify and never to linguistic seduction as, instead, is the case of the serpent, or of incommunicability and violence, as in the case of Cain.

The contribution of believers will then be of help to the world of the media itself by unfolding horizons of meaning and value that the digital culture alone can neither foresee nor portray.

To conclude, alongside many other communicators, I would like to remember Fr Matteo Ricci, the

fourth centenary of whose death we celebrated. He was a protagonist of Gospel proclamation in China in the modern age. In his work disseminating Christ's message, he always considered individual people and their cultural and philosophical context, values, and language, accepting everything positive to be found in his or her tradition, and offering to enliven and uplift it with the wisdom and truth of Christ.

Dear friends, I thank you for your service; I entrust you to the protection of the Virgin Mary and, as I assure you of my prayers, I impart the Apostolic Blessing to you all.