



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 15th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Social Communications in the Service of Responsible Human Freedom"

[Sunday, 31 May 1981]

Beloved Brothers and Sisters, The XV World Communications Day has as its theme: "Social Communications in the service of responsible human freedom". To this important subject I intend to devote this message, which I address lovingly to the sons of the Catholic Church and to all men of good will.¹ In the continual expansion and progress of the mass media we can discern a sign of the times, which constitutes an immense potential for universal understanding and a strengthening of the grounds for peace and brotherhood among the nations. Pius XII, of venerable memory, very rightly spoke, in the Encyclical *Miranda prorsus*, of 8 September 1957, of these media, classifying them as "wonderful inventions of which our age is proud", and seeing in them a gift of God. The Decree *Inter Mirifica* of the II Vatican Ecumenical Council, confirming this view, stressed the possibilities of these media, which "by their very nature are able to reach and move not only individuals, but even multitudes and the whole of human society". The Church, taking note of the enormous possibilities of the mass media, has always added to this positive evaluation, an appeal to considerations that go beyond enthusiasm, and asks people to reflect and consider what powers of suggestion these media have and will continue to have in their various kinds of influences on man. Of these we must always take full account. Man, even in the presence of the mass media, is called to be himself, that is, free and responsible, a user and not an object, critical and not passive.² Repeatedly, in the course of my pastoral ministry, I have spoken of that vision of man as a free person, which is based on divine revelation, and confirmed and demanded as a vital necessity by that same human nature. It is a vision more deeply felt at this time, perhaps as a reaction to the dangers and threats to which men are subjected and respond to with fear. At the beginning of this year of 1981, in the message for the World Day of Peace, I wished to call attention to freedom as a necessary condition for the pursuit of peace - freedom of individuals, of groups, of families, of peoples, of ethnic, language, or religious minorities. In truth, it is in freedom that a man becomes his true self. Towards this achievement he must grow, never halting for verbal or rhetorical distractions, as too often happens; nor distorting the meaning of freedom, nor forming a habit perversely as a license for doing whatever pleases him, even if it is evil (cf. *Gaudium et Spes*, 17). No, he must see and strictly apply himself, in thought and in action, to the freedom that is his because of his dignity as the creature made in the image of God. This dignity demands that a man make choices

informed and free, moved and persuaded by personal conviction and not by blind interior impulse or by mere external pressure (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1.c.). Even a psychological suggestion - apparently harmless - can, when skillfully handled with the tools of persuasion, make a man a target and endanger his freedom. This is the sense in which I mean to speak of social communications as the servant of responsible human freedom. Man is created free. But he is of the kind that must grow and develop by overcoming the self. Freedom has to be won. So a man must free himself from everything that might disqualify him from winning freedom.³ Now the mass media are here to offer themselves as agents who have a special role in this endeavour to achieve responsible human freedom. It is a context ever present in the mind of the Church. And the question has to be put to the media - can you show that there is a road from your great potential to the achievement of your purpose? Can the mass media, in truth, meet the expectations laid upon them as factors in the achievement among men of responsible freedom? How do these media support and promote the struggle for human freedom? In fact, they present as reality their own terms of expression. And often this amounts to an imposition of the media view on the man of today, who cannot detach himself or free himself from contacts he feels he needs. Often, the media are instruments of power that can become oppressive, especially where pluralism is not admitted. This can come about not only where freedom does not exist, as under a dictatorship of whatever brand; but also where freedom is to a degree preserved, but large vested interests bring constant pressure to bear on the media. This is particularly true of the violation of the right of religious freedom. But it also holds in other situations, where oppression consists of exploiting people. The responsible freedom of the communicators, who have the power of choosing what they communicate, must take account of the users of their production, who are also free and responsible. To remind the communicators that their employment demands from them love, justice, truth, as well as freedom - this is a duty of my pastoral ministry. Truth must never be distorted, justice neglected, love forgotten, if one is to observe ethical standards. To forget or lose sight of these is to produce bias, scandal, submission to the powerful, compliance with "reasons of state". The Church will not be the one to suggest adulterating or concealing truth, even a hard truth. The Church, precisely because she is experienced in human nature, does not indulge in an immature optimism; she preaches hope and does not approve of causing scandal.⁴ Still: one notes a certain aggressiveness in the information and images of the "mass media": from the field of entertainment to political speeches, from prefabricated and guided "cultural discoveries" which are nothing but "indoctrination" - to the very field of advertising. In our world, it is difficult to hypothesize regarding those mass media professionals who have been withdrawn from their own cultural matrix; this, however, must not cause anyone to impose his personal ideology on outside parties. The communicator has to fulfil his task with the maximum objectivity and not turn himself into a "hidden persuader" out of personal interest, for reasons of conformism, or for financial gain. There is then the danger to the responsible freedom of those who use the means of social communications, a danger which takes the form of a serious attack and is marked by the use of sex to the point where there is an outbreak of pornography: in the spoken or written word, in pictures and even so-called "artistic" posters. At times +this is tantamount to pandering, the result of which is both destructive and perverting. The denunciation of this state of affairs does not mean displaying what is so often described as "reactionary mentality" or censorship of free-will: the denunciation is done in the very name of freedom, which demands and necessitates that one does not suffer the imposition of those who seek to transform sexuality into an end in itself. This action would be not only anti-Christian but anti-human, with the consequent transition to drugs, perversion and degeneration. The intrinsic capacity of the means of social communication offers enormous possibilities. Among these there is the possibility to extol violence through the description and representation of that already appearing in daily newspapers along with consenting words and pictures, which perhaps even pretend to be condemning it! Too often it is something like a "search" tending to excite violent emotions to stimulate the attention, which is often slack.⁵ One cannot fail to speak of the effect and influence all this exercises especially on the imagination of the

young and of children, unthinking and open to messages and sensations, and great enjoyers of the mass media. Here is a subject which is still undergoing formation. Its maturation must therefore be aided without artificial traumatization. In this as in other areas, the Church requests responsibility not only from the communicators themselves, but also and in a special way, from the family. The life style - especially in the more industrialised nations - all too often causes families to abandon their responsibility to educate their children. Evasion of this duty is made easy by the presence of television and of printed materials in the home. These occupy the time for children and young people. No one can deny the justification for this when the means are lacking, to develop and use to advantage the free time of the young and to direct their energies. The result is that these young people are in most need of help in developing their responsible freedom. There is the duty - especially for believers, for men and women who love freedom, to protect the young from the aggressions they are subjected to by the media. May no one shirk from this duty by using the excuse that he or she is not involved.⁶ It must be asked, especially on this day, if pastoral action has achieved all that was asked of it in the uses of mass media! In fact, it must be remembered that, beyond the document *Communio et Progressio* - whose tenth anniversary it is - much was said at the Synod of Bishops in 1977 and ratified in the Apostolic Constitution *Catechesi Tradendae*. And still more emerged at the Synod of Bishops on the problems of the family, which ended in October 1980. Theology and pastoral practice, catechetical organization, the schools - especially the Catholic schools - the Catholic associations and groups - what have they done, concretely, on this specific, central matter? Direct action must be intensified in the creation of a critical conscience that will affect the attitudes and behavior not only of Catholics and brother Christians, but of all men and women, adults and young people, to the point where they will truly know, as free and responsible people, how to see, judge and act in the production as well as the choices which the media of social communication make. The pastoral ministry vested in me, the conciliar outlook I have so often spoken about and encouraged; my personal experience and convictions about humanity, about Christianity and about the role of bishop, all lead me to emphasize the possibilities for good, the richness, the timeliness of the media. I can add that the part of the media work which is labelled artistic does not escape me, but exalts me. But all this cannot hide the fact that - in their use - or abuse, there are those who have the profit, the industry, the means of power. There are so many aspects to consider in a global evaluation of the media. May they become ever less the instruments of manipulating people. May they become, more and more, promoters of freedom, media of influence, of growth, of maturing the freedom of man. With these wishes, I am happy to invoke upon all who read these words and seek to understand and share my pastoral care, the fullest heavenly grace, of which my Apostolic Blessing is a pledge. *From the Vatican, 10 May 1981* **IOANNES PAULUS PP. II**