



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II

FOR THE 19th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY "Social Communications for a Christian Promotion of Youth"[Sunday, 19 May 1985]

My dearest brothers and sisters in Christ, men and women who have at heart the dignity of the human person, and, above all, you young people of the whole world, who have to write a new page of history for the year 2000!

1. The Church is getting ready, as it does every year, to celebrate World Communications Day. An occasion of prayers and reflection, in which the whole Church community, called to announce and witness to the Gospel (Mk 16:15), ought to feel involved, so that the mass media, through the cooperation of all persons of good will, may truly contribute to "the realization of justice, of peace, of freedom and of human progress" (*Communio et Progressio*, 100). The theme of the world Day - "Social communications for a Christian promotion of youth" - echoes the initiative of the United Nations, which has proclaimed 1985 as the "International Year of Youth". The instruments of social communication, which are "capable of extending almost infinitely the area over which it is possible to make the word of God heard" (*Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 45), can effectively contribute towards young people's realization of their personal vocation as persons and as Christians, through a free and responsible choice, thus preparing them to be the builders and leaders of tomorrow's society.

2. The Church, in its teaching of the Second Vatican Council the twentieth anniversary of its closing is celebrated this year - and in its subsequent teaching, has clearly acknowledged the great importance of the mass media in the development of the human person: from the point of view of information, of education and training, of cultural maturation, as well as of leisure time occupation and entertainment. The Church has also, however, pointed out that the media are instruments for the service of humanity and of the common good; means, that is, not ends. The world of social communications is engaged today in a development which is dizzying in its extreme complexity, a development whose ultimate unfolding cannot be foreseen (we talk nowadays of a technotronic age, to indicate the growing interaction between technology and electronics); and in this complex world we encounter not a few problems, connected with the elaboration of a new world order of information and communication, in interplay with the prospects opened up by the employment of satellites and the conquest of space. We are speaking of a revolution which not only implies a change in the systems and techniques of communication, but involves the whole cultural, social and spiritual universe of the human person. In consequence, it cannot respond simply to its own internal norms, but must draw its own basic criteria from the truth of and about the human person, formed in the image of God. According to the right to information which every

person has, communication must always respond in its content to the truth, and out of respect for justice and charity it ought to be complete. With all the greater reason, this holds true when the communication is addressed to young people, who are in the position of opening themselves to the experiences of life. Above all in this case, information cannot remain indifferent to values which touch human existence down to the roots, such as the primacy of life from the moment of its conception, the moral and spiritual dimension, peace, and justice. Information cannot be neutral in face of problems and situations which on the national and international levels damage the connective fabric of society, such as war, violation of human rights, poverty, violence, drugs.³ From all time, the destiny of man has been decided in the confrontation of the truth, in the choice which he, in virtue of the freedom conferred on him by his Creator, makes between good and evil between the light and the darkness. But it is a striking and painful thing to see today an ever growing number of men blocked from the free exercise of this choice: because they are subjugated by authoritarian regimes, suffocated by ideological systems, manipulated by a totalitarian science and technique, conditioned by the mechanism of a society which generates ever increasing depersonalization. Liberty seems the great challenge which social communication must confront, to achieve the conquest of enough space for sufficient autonomy, right there where it must at present submit to the censorship of totalitarian regimes, or to the impositions of powerful cultural economic or political pressure groups. The mass media, as elements of unity and advancement, must overcome ideological and political barriers, walking with humanity in its march towards peace, and assisting the process of integration and fraternal solidarity among peoples, in two directions, East-West and North-South. As vehicles of education and culture, the mass media must contribute to the renewal of society and, in particular, to the human and moral development of young people, focusing their awareness on the historic tasks which await them on the threshold of the third millennium. With this end in mind, the mass media ought to open to youth new horizons, educating them to a sense of duty, to honesty, to respect for their peers, to a sense of justice, to friendship, to study, to work.⁴ These considerations bring into clear relief the immense potential for good which the instruments of social communication have in their power to set free. But at the same time they leave us to imagine the grave threats which the mass media can hold over society - if bent to the purposes of power or self-interest, or if used with the intention of distortion, against the truth, against the dignity of the human person or his freedom: and, worst of all, against the weakest and most defenseless. The newspaper, the book, the record, the film, the radio, and the television in particular, and the ever more sophisticated computer, these already represent an important point of contact, even if not the only one, between the young person and the external reality within which his daily life is lived. And the young person has recourse to the mass media with increasing frequency, either because he now has more spare time, or because the frantic rush of modern life causes him to seek more frequent escape in recreation. Then, the absence of both parents, when the mother as well as the father has to work outside the home, occasions a slackening in the traditional control over the use which is made of the media. Young people, therefore, are the first and most immediate receivers of the mass media, but they are also the most exposed to the flood of information and of images which arrive in the house by means of the media. Furthermore, it is not possible to ignore the danger of certain messages, transmitted even during the hours when youth listening and viewing is at its peak, slipped in under cover of ever more explicit and aggressive advertising, or introduced in shows which give the impression that the life of man is regulated only by the laws of sex and violence. The term "videodependence" is already in common use to describe the ever mightier influence that the instruments of social communication, with their capacity for suggestion and modernity, have upon the young people. There is need to examine this phenomenon very thoroughly, to verify its real consequences on receivers who have not yet developed a sufficiently mature critical sense. It is not merely a question of conditioning free time, that is, of limiting the amount of time available each day for other intellectual and recreational activities, but there is also question of the effects upon the very psychology, the culture, the behaviour of youth. The education imparted by the traditional teachers,

particularly the parents, was achieved by a fundamental interpersonal relationship which permitted the two-way flow of dialogue; this tends now to be replaced by a one-way education. In place of a culture laid down upon a value-content framework, on the quality of the information, there thus enters a culture of the temporary which favours the rejection of long term commitments, with a culture so overpowering that it induces a flight from the making of free personal choices. For a training directed towards encouraging the growth of a sense of responsibility, individual and collective, there is substituted an attitude of passive acceptance towards the fashions and the needs imposed by a materialism which while stimulating consumption of goods, empties the conscience. The imagination, which is the very property of our early years, the expression of youth's creativity, of its impulsive generosity, dries up in the glut of images absorbed so effortlessly, and a habit of indolence is formed which quenches stimuli and desires, and smothers any impulse to undertake new tasks or projects.⁵ It is a situation which, if it is not to become more widespread, must surely persuade those who work in social communications to reflect very seriously and very deeply. They have an uplifting task, but one which is at the same time tremendously demanding: on the use which they make of their resources of talent and expertise depend in large measure the training and education of the people who, tomorrow, must achieve the betterment of this society of ours, impoverished in its human and spiritual values and threatened with self-destruction. Parents and educators have an even more demanding task. The witness they give, supported by conduct which is culturally and morally consistent, may in fact very well be the most efficacious and credible teaching the young can receive. Dialogue, critical discernment, vigilance, these are the conditions which are indispensable when educating the young person to behave responsibly in the use of mass media, re-establishing in him or her the right balance whenever there has been a negative impact from these instruments. The International Year of Youth, even in this area, makes demands upon the world of adults. It is a duty upon all to help the young enter society as responsible citizens, well-rounded people, conscious of their own dignity.⁶ It is here precisely that the 19th World Communications Day takes on its full significance. The theme of this forthcoming celebration goes right to the heart of the Church's mission, for the Church must bring salvation to all men, preaching the Gospel "from the housetops" (Mt 10:27; Lk 12:3). Great possibilities are offered today to social communications, in which the Church recognizes the sign of God's creative and redemptive work, the work which man must continue. These instruments can therefore become powerful channels for the transmission of the Gospel, on the level of pre-evangelization, and on that of the deepening of faith, to favour the human and Christian promotion of youth. This evidently calls for:--profound educational activity, in the family, in the school, in the parish, through the catechism, to instruct and guide the young to a balanced and disciplined use of the mass media, helping them to form a critical judgment, illumined by faith, on what they see, hear and read. (*Inter Mirifica* 10, 16; *Communio et Progressio* 67-70, 107);--careful and specific practical and theoretical training in the seminaries, in apostolic associations of laity, in the new ecclesial movements - especially youth movements, not only to secure an adequate acquaintance with the instruments of social communication, but also to realize their undoubted potential for strengthening dialogue in charity and reinforcing the bonds of unity (*Communio et Progressio* 108, 110, 115-117);--the active and coherent presence of Christians in all the sectors of social communication, bringing not only the contribution of their cultural and professional expertise, but also the living witness of their faith (*Communio et Progressio*, 103);--the engagement of the Catholic community, so that, when the need arises, it will denounce shows and programmes which assault the moral good of the young, state its claim for more truthful information about the Church, and demand transmissions more positively inspired by the authentic values of life (*Inter Mirifica*, 14);--the presentation of the Gospel message in its integrity: taking trouble not to betray it, not to trivialize it, not to reduce it, with intent, to a merely socio-political vision; but also, after the example of Christ the perfect communicator, adapting it to the receivers, to the mentality of young people, to their manner of speaking, to their state and condition (*Catechesi Tradendae*, 35, 39, 40).⁷ And it is to the youth in particular that I wish to

address myself at the conclusion of this Message: to the young people who have already encountered Christ, to those who have come to Rome at the beginning of Holy Week, in spiritual unity with millions of their age group, to proclaim with the Pope that "Christ is our peace" but also to all young people who, even in a confused way, amid uncertainties, anguish and mistakes, aspire to encounter this "Jesus who is called Christ" (Mt 1:16), to give a meaning and a purpose to their life. Dearest young people! Up to now, I have addressed myself to the world of adults. But in reality, it is to you in particular that I wish to send this Message. The importance and the ultimate meaning of the instruments of social communication depend, definitively, on the use which human freedom makes of them. It will, therefore, depend on you, on the use you make of them, on the critical judgment with which you know how to use them, whether these instruments are going to serve your human and Christian formation, whether, on the contrary, they are going to be turned against you, suffocating your liberty and putting an end to your thirst for authenticity. It will depend on you, young people, for to you it falls to construct the society of tomorrow, in which the intensified flow of information and of communications will multiply the forms of association among men, and technological development will hammer on the barriers that separate men and nations. It will depend on you whether the new society is going to be one sole human family, where men and peoples can live in closest collaboration, fully integrated, or whether in the society of the future the conflicts and divisions which afflict the world today are simply going to be more bitter. In the words of the Apostle Peter, I repeat the wish which was expressed in my *Letter to the young men and women of the world*: that you may "always have your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope that you all have" (1 Pet 3:15). "Yes, you your very selves, for on you depends the future, on you depend what are left of the thousand years now ending and the quality of the opening years of the new millennium. Therefore, don't be passive; take over your responsibilities in every field open to you in our world!" (n. 16). Dearest young people! The invitation I offer you to responsibility, to engagement, is first of all an invitation to search for "the truth that will make you free" (Jn 8:32), and the truth is Christ (cf. Jn 14:6). And so it is an invitation to place the truth of Christ at the center of your life to give witness to this truth in the story of your daily life, in the decisive choices you have to make, in order to help humanity set its feet firmly on the path of peace and of justice. With these sentiments I impart to all my Apostolic Blessing, praying that you may be enlightened from heaven. *From the Vatican, 15 April 1985.* **IOANNES PAULUS PP. II**