



# The Holy See

---

APOSTOLIC JOURNEY  
TO THE UNITED STATES OF AMERICA AND CANADA

**ADDRESS OF HIS HOLINESS JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PEOPLE OF THE COMMUNICATIONS INDUSTRY**

*Registry Hotel (Los Angeles)  
Tuesday, 15 September 1987*

*Ladies and Gentlemen of the Communications Industry,  
Dear Friends,*

1. I am very pleased to be here with you. I would like to be able to greet each one of you personally and to express my regard for you individually. Although this is not possible, I wish to express my sincere respect for *all the categories of the media* that you represent – the film industry, the music and recording industry, radio, electronic news, television and all those who inform the world through the written word – and for *the diverse functions* that you perform as workers, writers, editors, managers and executives. I greet you in the full range of your activities, from the very visible to the relatively hidden.

My visit to Los Angeles, and indeed to the United States, would seem incomplete without this meeting, since you represent *one of the most important American influences on the world today*. You do this in every area of social communications and contribute thereby to the development of a mass popular culture. Humanity is profoundly influenced by what you do. *Your activities affect communication itself*: supplying information, influencing public opinion, offering entertainment. The consequences of these activities are numerous and diverse. You help your fellow citizens to enjoy leisure, to appreciate art and to profit from culture. You often provide the stories they tell and the songs they sing. You give them news of current events, a vision of humanity and motives for hope. Yours is indeed a profound influence on society. Hundreds of millions of people see your films and television programmes, listen to your voices, sing your songs and reflect your opinions. It is a fact

that your smallest decisions can have global impact. 2. Your work can be *a force for great good or great evil*. You yourselves know the dangers, as well as the splendid opportunities open to you. Communication products can be works of great beauty, revealing what is *noble and uplifting* in humanity and promoting what is just and fair and true. On the other hand communications can appeal to and promote what is *debased* in people: dehumanized sex through pornography or through a casual attitude towards sex and human life; greed through materialism and consumerism or irresponsible individualism; anger and vengefulness through violence or self-righteousness. All the media of popular culture which you represent can build or destroy, uplift or cast down. You have untold possibilities for good, ominous possibilities for destruction. It is the difference between death and life – the death or life of the spirit. And it is a matter of choice. The challenge of Moses to the people of Israel is applicable to all of us today: "I set before you life and death... Choose life" (*Deut.* 30, 19). 3. There is something of great interest for all of us in the Constitution of the United States. The same amendment that guarantees freedom of speech and freedom of the press also guarantees freedom of religious practice. *The link between the art of human expression and the exercise of religion is profound*. Social communications in fact provide an important first step in uniting human beings in mutual love, and this first step is also a step to God, "for God is love" (*1Jo.* 4, 8). Religious practice for its part fosters communication with God. But it also fosters human communication, since *human communication is part of that relationship of love for neighbour* that is mandated in both the Old and New Testaments. It is easy to see why the Church has recognized and taught that people have a right to communicate. Linked to this right is *the right to information*, about which the Second Vatican Council speaks in these words: "Because of the progress of modern society and the increasing interdependence of its members, it is clear that information has become very useful and generally necessary... There exists therefore in human society a right to information on the subjects that are of concern to people" (*Inter Mirifica*, 5). In this way, then, the Church recognizes the need for freedom of speech and freedom of the press, just as does your Constitution. But she goes further. Rights imply *corresponding duties*. The proper exercise of the right to information demands that the content of what is communicated be true and – within the limits set by justice and charity – complete (Cfr. *ibid.*). Your very profession invites you to reflect on this *obligation to truth and its completeness*. Included here is the obligation *to avoid any manipulation* of truth for any reason. This manipulation in fact takes place when certain issues are deliberately passed over in silence, in order that others may be unduly emphasized. It also occurs when information is altered or withheld so that society will be less able to resist the imposition of a given ideology. The obligation to truth and its completeness applies not only to the coverage of news, but to all your work. Truth and completeness should characterize the content of artistic expression and entertainment. You find a real meaning in your work when you exercise your role as collaborators of truth – *collaborators of truth in the service of justice, fairness and love*. 4. Your industry not only speaks to people and for people; it makes communication possible among them. In this we see how your activities transcend the categories of both rights and duties and confer upon you *inestimable privileges*. Just before joining you this afternoon, I met young people in several cities by using satellite links. For me this is just one example of how your industry can help foster communication and unite people in fraternal love. It is within your power to

use technology to promote what is deeply human and to direct it to the work of peace. You have *marvellous tools* which others lack. They must be employed *in the service of people's right to communicate*. In today's modern world there is always the danger of communication becoming exclusively one-way, depriving audiences of the opportunity *to participate in the communication process*. Should that happen with you, you would no longer be communicators in the full, human sense. The people themselves, the general public whom you serve, should not be excluded from having the opportunity for public dialogue. In order to foster such a dialogue, you yourselves, as communicators, must listen as well as speak. You must seek to communicate with people, and not just speak to them. This involves learning about people's needs, being aware of their struggles and *presenting all forms of communications with the sensitivity that human dignity requires* – your human dignity and theirs. This applies especially to all audio-visual programmes.

5. *At the basis of all human rights is the dignity of the human person* created in the image and likeness of God (*Gen. 1, 27*). A recognition of this human dignity is also a part of your civil tradition in the United States, and is expressed in the declaration of your nation's independence: all people are created equal in their human dignity and are endowed by their Creator with inalienable rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. All other rights too are rooted in human dignity, including the right to maintain one's privacy and not to be exploited in the intimacy of one's family. The fundamental dignity of the human person is still more strongly *proclaimed by the Church*. She raises her voice on behalf of people everywhere, declaring the dignity of every human being, every man, woman and child. None is excluded because all bear the image of God. Physical and mental handicaps, spiritual weaknesses and human aberrations cannot obliterate the dignity of man. You will understand why the Church attaches such importance to this principle found on the first page of the Bible; it will later become the basis of the teaching of Jesus Christ as he says: "Always treat others as you would like them to treat you" (*Matth. 7, 12*). In particular, *social communications must support human dignity* because the world is constantly tempted to forget it. Whether in news or in drama, whether in song or in story, you are challenged to respect what is human and to recognize what is good. Human beings must never be despised because of limitations, flaws, disorders, or even sins. Twenty years ago, my predecessor Pope Paul VI, speaking to a gathering much like this one, told that creative community in Rome: "It is a fact that when, as writers and artists, you are able to reveal in the human condition, however lowly or sad it may be, a spark of goodness, at that very instant a glow of beauty pervades your whole work. We are not asking that you should play the part of moralist, but we are expressing confidence in your mysterious power of opening up the glorious regions of light that lie behind the mystery of human life" (*Pauli VI Allocutio*, die 6 maii 1967: *Insegnamenti di Paolo VI*, V (1967) 209-215). As you do precisely this – open up the glorious regions of light that lie behind the mystery of human life – you must ask yourselves *if what you communicate is consistent with the full measure of human dignity*. How do the weakest and the most defenseless in society appear in your words and images: the most severely handicapped, the very old, foreigners and the undocumented, the unattractive and the lonely, the sick and the infirm? Whom do you depict as having – or not having – human worth?

6. Certainly your profession subjects you to *a great measure of accountability* – accountability to God, to the community and before the witness of history. And yet at times it seems that everything is left in

your hands. Precisely because your responsibility is so great and your accountability to the community is not easily rendered juridically, society relies so much on your good will. In a sense the world is at your mercy. Errors in judgment, mistakes in evaluating the propriety and justice of what is transmitted, and wrong criteria in art can offend and wound consciences and human dignity. They can encroach on sacred fundamental rights. The *confidence* that the community has in you *honours you deeply and challenges you mightily*. 7. I would encourage you in yet another way: *to respect also your own dignity*. All that I have said about the dignity of human beings applies to you. *Daily cares oppress you* in ways different from those arising in other kinds of work. Your industry reflects the fast pace of the news and changing tastes. It deals with vast amounts of money that bring with them their own problems. It places you under extreme pressure to be successful, without telling you what "success" really is. Working constantly with images, you face the temptation of seeing them as reality. Seeking to satisfy the dreams of millions, you can become lost in a world of fantasy. At this point, you must cultivate *the integrity consonant with your own human dignity*. You are more important than success, more valuable than any budget. Do not let your work drive you blindly, for if work enslaves you, you will soon enslave your art. Who you are and what you do are too important for that to happen. Do not let money be your sole concern, for it too is capable of enslaving art as well as souls. In your life there must also be room for your families and for leisure. You need time to rest and be re-created, for only in quiet can you absorb the peace of God. You yourselves are called to what is noble and lofty in human living, and you must study the highest expressions of the human spirit. You have *a great part in shaping the culture* of this nation and other nations. To you is entrusted an important portion of the vast heritage of the human race. In fulfilling your mission you must always be aware of *how your activities affect the world community*, how they serve the cause of universal solidarity. 8. *The Church* wishes you to know that she *is on your side*. For a long time she has been a patron and defender of the arts; she has promoted the media and been in the forefront of the use of new technology. The first book for the printing press of Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of movable type, was the inspired word of God, the Bible. Vatican Radio was established under the direction of the inventor of radio, Guglielmo Marconi. Today, too, the Church stands ready to help you by her encouragement and *to support you in all your worthy aims*. She offers you her challenge and her praise. I pray that you will welcome that help and never be afraid to accept it. Ladies and gentlemen of the communications industry: I have set before you the broad outlines of *a choice for good within the framework of your profession*. I ask you to choose the common good. It means honouring the dignity of every human being. I am convinced that to a great extent we can share a common hope, rooted in *a vision of the human race harmoniously united through communication*. I am sure too that all of you, whether Christian or not, will permit me to allude to the great fascination that surrounds the mystery of the communicating word. For Christians, the communicating word is the explanation of all reality as expressed by Saint John: "In the beginning was the Word; the Word was in God's presence, and the Word was God" (*Jo.* 1, 1). And for all those who hold the Judeo-Christian tradition, the nobility of communication is linked to the wisdom of God and expressed in his loving revelation. Thus the Book of Deuteronomy records God's communication to Israel: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your

soul, and with all your strength. Take to heart these words which I enjoin on you today" (*Deut.* 6, 6). Ladies and gentlemen: *as communicators of the human word, you are the stewards and administrators of an immense spiritual power* that belongs to the patrimony of mankind and is meant to enrich the whole of the human community. The challenge that opens up before you truly requires generosity, service and love. I am sure that you will strive to meet it. And, as you do, I pray that you will experience in your own lives a deep satisfaction and joy. And may the peace of God dwell in your hearts.

© Copyright 1987 - Libreria Editrice Vaticana

---

Copyright © Dicastero per la Comunicazione - Libreria Editrice Vaticana