

# **Communicating One's Own Convictions. Reflections in Light of the Magisterium of John Paul II and of Benedict XVI\***

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## **1 Introduction: Communication and Culture**

The sentiments of friendship I have for my colleagues of the Social Institutional Communication Faculty have been the sole reason for my accepting the invitation to give this conference. There are no reasons of competence, because I do not know the technical aspects of institutional communication, while all of you are experts. I ask you, therefore, to have some understanding and patience with me.

I would like to begin my reflection by referring to a Discourse of John Paul II to the participants of a meeting of experts in communication that was promoted by the Italian Episcopal Conference in November of 2002. John Paul II then mentioned the fact that “the rapid technological transformations are determining, especially in the field of social communication, a new factor in the transmission of knowledge, for the coexistence between peoples, for the formation of lifestyles and attitudes. Communication generates a culture,

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\* The following text was originally addressed to a conference of journalists. Translated by Tom and Kira Howes.

and that culture is transmitted by communication.”<sup>1</sup> This nexus between communication and culture is one of the principal reasons for which the world of communication arouses great interest among us who are interested in ethics. We all know that the attainment of our personal moral maturity is not independent of communication or culture – namely – of the immanent and objectified logic in the *ethos* of the social group, an *ethos* which presupposes a sharing of certain ends and models, and is expressed in laws, customs, history, and in celebrations of events and characters that fit the moral identity of the group.

If ethics is concerned with the relationship between communication media, culture, and personal moral conscience, then it is of interest to communication professionals that culture has an imminent and objectified logic, in which ideas and sentiments have a somewhat autonomous consistency and development. It is as if the ideas, at the time they leave the conscience and pass to the plane of communication, are separated from the individual minds which have produced them, and have begun to take on a life of their own and develop with a self-dependent force, with objective consistency, and their own intrinsic dynamics, or perhaps even distinct from the intentionality of the person or persons who put them into circulation.

Whoever through communication aims to positively intervene – as we could say in Christian terms – in the creation and transmission of culture, must pay more attention to the consistency and objective development of ideas rather than to the intentionality of the individuals, or to *ad hominem* arguments, to fortunate “outcomes,” or to purely dialectical arguments. With a striking effect, an adversary may be momentarily silenced, but if the varying intrinsic consistency of their ideas and the possible lines of development of those ideas have not been understood and objectively neutralized with a culturally adequate response, then such ideas will have a long life even though the adversary has been silenced.

Communications professionals know these things well and lay as the foundation of each communication strategy a work of analysis that they direct at

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, *Address to the Participants in the Conference for Those Working in Communications and Culture Promoted by the Italian Bishops' Conference (CEI)*, 9-XI-2002, no. 2, our translation.

understanding the stronger points in the contrary position. Only a position which is well-understood can be contrasted effectively, and such a contrast will only be effective if a positive outlook can be formed that both preserves the good in the position of the adversary and exceeds that good.

In light of these introductory reflections, I now wish to focus on some points that I think are of interest for those who wish to carry convictions of the Christian mold to the objective plane of the culture. This is a task which you develop every day insofar as you are responsible for offices of communication in the Church, and which leads you to be confronted with the problematic particulars of our pluralistic society.

## 2 Truth and Freedom

John Paul II noted on a good few occasions that the conflict between freedom and truth has marked many aspects of contemporary culture.<sup>2</sup> Benedict XVI had a very similar concern regarding the concept of relativism.<sup>3</sup> The debates about relativism have frequently succumbed to the temptation of responding with a dialectical argument of this style: he who affirms that all truth is relative contradicts himself. Such argumentation, in reality, does not serve anything, because it does not understand—and therefore does not touch on the stronger points of—the critical position.

The issue is quite complex and here I will only refer to one aspect: the relativism of conceptions of good on the socio-ethical plane. Concerning this plane, relativism draws encouragement from the fact that we find in today's society a pluralism of life projects and of conceptions of the human good. According to the relativist perspective, such a finding confronts us with this alternative: either abandon the classical claim of pronouncing judgments of value about the diverse lifestyles which our experience offers, or one must

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. For example John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptor Hominis*, 4-III-1979, no. 12; Enc. *Centessimus Annus*, 1-V-1991, nos. 4, 17 & 46; Enc. *Veritatis Splendor*, 6-VIII-1993, nos. 34, 84, 87 & 88; Enc. *Fides et Ratio*, 14-IX-1998, no. 90.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. For example John Paul II, Enc. *Redemptor Hominis*, 4-III-1979, no. 12; Enc. *Centessimus Annus*, 1-V-1991, nos. 4, 17 & 46; Enc. *Veritatis Splendor*, 6-VIII-1993, nos. 34, 84, 87 & 88; Enc. *Fides et Ratio*, 14-IX-1998, no. 90.

abandon the ideal of tolerance, according to which each conception of life is worth exactly the same as any other, or at least, it has the same right to exist.<sup>4</sup> Beyond the value one wants to give to this argument, I think its strong point lies in this historical truth: it has happened many times, over the course of the ages, that some have violently sacrificed liberty at the altar of truth, thus creating a contraposition between truth and freedom: something the current opinion intends to assert in favor of freedom.

Valid strategies for communicating Christian convictions in present society and culture may be different. However, there is one thing that ought to be avoided at all costs: the use of words or attitudes that reinforce what in the relativistic mentality is more persuasive – namely – to suggest that a committed Christian is always willing to sacrifice liberty at the altar of truth. This would entail admitting the inevitability of the contraposition between truth and freedom; a contraposition which the relativist would assert in favor of freedom, and which the convicted Christian would assert in favor of truth. Both in this and other cases, said contraposition is presupposed. Put in positive terms, communication of Christian convictions – more generally, communication of positive ethical content – must show the facts, and not just with words, that between truth and freedom exists true harmony. This requires putting on display, and not in a purely tactical way, a conscience that is convinced of the value and of the meaning of personal freedom. In a letter or public statement inspired by Christian values, any number of references to freedom will always be too few.

The form which love of personal freedom can assume on the technical level of institutional communication is an issue on which you do not need my reflections. From my point of view, I can only note that convictions of a substantive nature – and the value of freedom is one such conviction – are either held or not held: they cannot be improvised for opportunistic reasons. Benedict XVI is convinced that the moral treasure of humanity exists as an invitation to freedom and as a possibility for it.<sup>5</sup> At the same time he advises that the temptation of securing faith through power has been continuously present over the course of the centuries, and so he writes, “faith has always

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. J. Habermas, *Teoria della Morale*, (Rome/Bari: Laterza, 1995), 88, our translation.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Enc. *Spe Salvi*, 30-XI-2007, no. 24.

run the risk of being suffocated precisely through the embrace of power.”<sup>6</sup>

To ensure that faith and morality are not stifled by the embrace of power it is necessary to have a sense for distinguishing, also on the level of communication, the scope of ethics from that of the ethical-political and the ethical-legal.

### 3 Ethics and Politics

Among the ethical issues is included the relationship of personal conscience with truth, generally with truth about good and perhaps also with the religious truth. On this plane, the conscience must open itself to the truth, which possesses a manifestly normative power over the conscience and the choices of the person. The ethical-political and ethical-legal issues are, in contrast, concerned with the relationship between people or between people and institutions. In the political and legal domain, these relationships are often mediated by the coercive power that the state and its representatives legitimately draw upon.

Naturally, the two spheres – ethical and political – have close relationships with each other, and perhaps have a parallel development. Thus, for example, intentional homicide is both a grave moral fault, and is at the same time a crime that the state must prevent and deter as much as possible, and, in any case, one that it must pursue and punish. Nevertheless, even in these cases there remains a formal difference between the ethical and political planes. This difference has obvious manifestations. We consider, for example, the pardon. The pardon of moral fault is one matter, but the pardon of a crime is quite another. It is desirable that the relatives of the murdered person come to Christian forgiveness of the murderer, it is unthinkable, however, that the State should leave the crime unpunished. To say otherwise would be an unacceptable ideological mishap or to severely miss the meaning of the State and of the common good.

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<sup>6</sup> J. Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, *Gesù di Nazaret*, (Milan: Rizzoli, 2007), 62-63, our translation.

In the communication of content or of moral positions it is appropriate to carefully distinguish the ethical plane from the political plane. If the content of the message is of an exclusively ethical nature, it must assume an ethical foundation, and it must make it clear that ethical judgment is not proposed with the aim of finding a determinate use of political coercion. If the content of the message also has an ethical-political or ethical-legal character, it should be given a specifically political and legal foundation, namely, a foundation which makes clear not only whether the behavior in question is ethically wrong, but may also provide reasons why the common good necessarily requires that it be prohibited or punished by the State. These reasons are not identical to those which indicate why such behavior is an ethical error, given that we all admit that not all moral faults must be prohibited or punished by the State.

I propose a very simple example. When the Catholic Church teaches that the artificial feeding and hydration of patients in a persistent vegetative state is ordinary care that is—except in few exceptional cases—ethically obligatory,<sup>7</sup> it directly teaches that to reject for oneself or to deny to others such care is a morally wrong choice that is illicit to make and with which it is illicit to cooperate. However, this teaching does not mean that for each time a doctor of good conscience encounters a patient who, through an advance directive or through the patient's relatives, refuses artificial feeding and hydration, that the doctor is authorized or obliged to proceed always and automatically to a coercive power. They are two distinct matters. One matter is the judgment on the morality of a choice, and the other is that such a judgment grants to a private citizen (the doctor) a coercive power over other private citizens (the patient). Where a refusal of the patient or of their relatives creates a situation of this kind and they do not listen to the doctor's recommendations, a judge should intervene. And if the law of the State explicitly condones unethical behavior, for example, euthanasia, then such unjust laws must be fought with pertinent ethical-political arguments, based on human rights and in the common good, without giving the impression that the law is criticized

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. John Paul II, *Address to the Participants in the International Congress on "Life-Sustaining Treatments and Vegetative State: Scientific Advances and Ethical Dilemmas"*, 20-III-2004; Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Responses to Certain Questions of the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops Concerning Artificial Nutrition and Hydration*, 1-VIII-2007. The responses are accompanied by an illustrative note.

because it denies to a private citizen a coercive power over another who holds ethically wrong ideas.

## 4 The Relationship Between the Church and the Modern State

Those who are responsible for presenting to the public the positions of the Catholic Church are often charged with the duty to point out and to encourage the criticism of certain laws of the State, or those of any level of government. The Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* has clearly expressed the right and duty of the Church “to pass moral judgment in those matters which regard public order when the fundamental rights of a person or the salvation of souls require it,”<sup>8</sup> while specifying at the same time the ways of life and the outlook toward which we must be moved. Thus it is stated, for example, that “it is of paramount importance, especially in the context of a pluralistic society, to correctly understand the relationships between the political community and the Church; and to clearly distinguish between the actions that Christians, as individuals or as a group, conduct in a personal capacity—as citizens according to their Christian conscience—and the actions they perform on behalf of the Church, in communion with their pastors.”<sup>9</sup>

In his important speech on December 22, 2005, Benedict XVI presented some points which should be taken into account so that our presentation of the Church’s moral judgments be appropriate, not only in subject matter, but also by virtue of its form and foundational arguments. Benedict XVI notes that in the historical development of the Church’s positions there is a process of “innovation in continuity”, that will lead us to understand that those decisions of the Church which are related to contingent things “should necessarily be contingent themselves, precisely because they refer to a specific reality that is changeable in itself.”<sup>10</sup> The principles are enduring, “On the

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<sup>8</sup> Second Vatican Council, Const. Past. *Gaudium et Spes*, 7-XII-1965, no. 76.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Benedict XVI, *Address to the Roman Curia Offering Them his Christmas Greetings*, 22-XII-2005.

other hand, not so permanent are the practical forms that depend on the historical situation and are therefore subject to change. Basic decisions, therefore, continue to be well-grounded, whereas the way they are applied to new contexts can change.”<sup>11</sup>

This observation is applicable to the redefinition, performed by the Second Vatican Council, of the relationship between the Church and the modern State. From this perspective, Benedict XVI draws a very clear distinction between the relationship of conscience and truth, and the relationships of justice between persons. I have here some very significant words: “If religious freedom were to be considered an expression of the human inability to discover the truth and thus become a canonization of relativism, then this social and historical necessity is raised inappropriately to the metaphysical level and thus stripped of its true meaning. Consequently, it cannot be accepted by those who believe that the human person is capable of knowing the truth about God and, on the basis of the inner dignity of the truth, is bound to this knowledge. It is quite different, on the other hand, to perceive religious freedom as a need that derives from human coexistence, or indeed, as an intrinsic consequence of the truth that cannot be externally imposed but that the person must adopt only through the process of conviction. The Second Vatican Council, recognizing and making its own an essential principle of the modern State with the Decree on Religious Freedom, has recovered the deepest patrimony of the Church.”<sup>12</sup>

Benedict XVI shows a fine and courageous act of discernment when he states that in the Second Vatican Council the Church has made its own an ethical-political principle of the modern State, and that it has recovered something that belongs to the Catholic tradition. The Pope has no delusions of thinking that with this realization all misunderstandings are overcome, because he is certain that the Gospel will always be at odds with the perils and errors of man.<sup>13</sup> The explanations and distinctions drawn from this speech proceed from the duty “to overcome erroneous or superfluous contradictions” and to be able, thus “to present to our world the requirement of the Gospel in all

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

its greatness and purity.”<sup>14</sup>

Returning to our initial reflections, it is necessary to specify that the audacious ideas expressed by Benedict XVI in this speech—and what I am also trying to say, taking freely as my inspiration what was said in his ideas—are not a recipe for the immediate success of institutional communication interventions of the Church. At least as far as I am concerned, I do not have the competence to formulate such recipes. Rather, it is good to remember that beyond the immediate debate between people or between media professionals, there exists the objective contrast between ideal positions, and that it is of interest within this latter level to offer a response which assumes and exceeds the partial truth found in the contrary position. Giving a culturally appropriate response to an act which is considered wrong on the part of Parliament or of a government is quite difficult, because it requires, above all, a strong sense of the State, a keen awareness of the ethical-political values of the various institutions of the modern State, an awareness which should not be obscured even by the fact—painful though it may be—that this or that act of parliament, which must be dealt with in the present moment, is deemed to be completely wrong.

On the other hand, firmness with regard to principles must be and appear compatible with the awareness that the concrete realization of human and social goods in a determinate historical, geographical, and cultural context is characterized by the contingency, at least partially insuperable, that characterizes all that is practical. For this purpose, I like to recall that St. Josemaría Escrivá said, “none can claim to impose on temporal issues dogmas that do not exist.”<sup>15</sup> With this he did not mean that everything under the sun is contingent, since he at the same time *shouted from the mountain tops*, without human respect, universally valid ethical requirements. His thought is expressed clearly in this brief text: “Do not forget that in human affairs other people may also be right: they see the same question as you, but from a different point of view, under another light, with other shades, with other

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *Conversations with Monsignor Escrivá de Balaguer*, ed. 2 reprinted, (Shannon, Ireland: Ecclesia Press, 1972), no. 77. Concerning this matter see: A. Rodríguez Luño, *Forming One's Conscience in Social and Political Matters as Seen in the Teachings of Blessed Josemaría Escrivá*, “Romana” (English Edition) XIII/24 (1997) 162-181.

contours. Only in faith and morals is there an indisputable standard: that of our Mother the Church.”<sup>16</sup>

## 5 The Autonomy of Temporal Realities

Another point of interest is doing everything possible to ensure that the intervention of the one who handles the institutional communication of the Church be taken in its proper context by its recipient. It sometimes happens that the position sustained by the Church on ethical matters coincides with that of all—or many—citizens who are rightfully active in a political way. It then creates a delicate situation, which may give rise to criticism of the Church, as if the latter would support, not only an ethical or ethical-political position, but a particular group of citizens inasmuch as they are one of the competing political parties. The Church is then accused of meddling in the politics of the state and of endangering the latter’s secularity.

It is true that these accusations are often under false pretext or are even malicious. However, as we said at the beginning, little attention should be paid to attitudes of this or that individual, because the work of institutional communication is to offer, above all, an adequate response to the objective consistency of such critiques.

In this respect, in my opinion there are two relevant directives to be considered. The first is to make clear that all citizens, including those who are members of the legislative body or government, have the right and the duty to uphold reasonable solutions which are conscientiously considered as useful for the good of their own country. Each citizen consults specialized books that he considers reliable, he speaks with whomever he wants, and draws inspiration from a school of political theory or from the social doctrine of the Church. Political solutions are judged on the merits of their intrinsic value and the merits of the rational arguments which support them. Wanting to question the sources used by each citizen would—in addition to indicating a

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<sup>16</sup> Saint Josemaría Escrivá, *Furrow*, (London-New York: Little Hills, 1987), no. 275. *Surco* (*Furrow*) was published posthumously (Madrid: Rialp, 1986).

lack of respect for their conscience and freedom—lead to the absurd claim that the secular state must support slavery, given that the Catholic Church condemns it.

The second consideration refers to the distinction between the tasks of the State and those of the Church, which is a presupposition of our work in institutional communications. For this purpose, Benedict XVI has provided some useful instructions in the encyclical, *Deus caritas est*. “The just ordering of society and the State—asserts the Pontiff—is a central responsibility of politics.”<sup>17</sup> The distinction between that which belongs to Caesar and that which belongs to God, with the consequent autonomy of the temporal realities, pertains to the fundamental structure of Christianity.<sup>18</sup> “The State must inevitably face the question of how justice can be achieved here and now. The problem is one of practical reason; but if reason is to be exercised properly, it must undergo constant purification (. . .). Here politics and faith meet.”<sup>19</sup>

Catholic social doctrine is offered as an aid, but it—as specified by Benedict XVI—“has no intention of giving the Church power over the State. Even less is it an attempt to impose on those who do not share the faith ways of thinking and modes of conduct proper to faith.”<sup>20</sup> The social doctrine of the Church argues from reason and natural law, and in each case recognizes that the construction of a just social order and State is a political task which “cannot be the Church’s immediate responsibility. Yet, since it is also a most important human responsibility, the Church is duty-bound to offer, through

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<sup>17</sup> Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus Caritas Est*, 25-XII-2005, no. 28.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. *Ibid.* The meaning of the expression “the autonomy of earthly affairs” was clarified by the Second Vatican Council: “If by the autonomy of earthly affairs we mean that created things and societies themselves enjoy their own laws and values which must be gradually deciphered, put to use, and regulated by men, then it is entirely right to demand that autonomy. Such is not merely required by modern man, but harmonizes also with the will of the Creator. (. . .) But if the expression, the independence of temporal affairs, is taken to mean that created things do not depend on God, and that man can use them without any reference to their Creator, anyone who acknowledges God will see how false such a meaning is. For without the Creator the creature would disappear. For their part, however, all believers of whatever religion always hear His revealing voice in the discourse of creatures. When God is forgotten, however, the creature itself grows unintelligible.” (Pastoral Constitution *Gaudium et Spes*, 7-XII-1965, no. 36).

<sup>19</sup> Benedict XVI, Enc. *Deus Caritas Est*, 25-XII-2005, no. 28.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

the purification of reason and through ethical formation, her own specific contribution towards understanding the requirements of justice and achieving them politically. The Church—Benedict XVI also states— cannot and must not take upon herself the political battle to bring about the most just society possible. She cannot and must not replace the State. Yet at the same time she cannot and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice. She has to play her part through rational argument and she has to reawaken the spiritual energy without which justice, which always demands sacrifice, cannot prevail and prosper.”<sup>21</sup> There is a point, which we just read about in *Deus Caritas Est*, in which faith and politics meet. This point requires the utmost attention within the sphere of communication, as to the way in which our words and our attitudes may express, to anyone who will listen with good will, that the Christian faith does not identify with any particular political culture, but it has so much to say to the various political cultures of all men and peoples. Moreover, the Church can only proclaim, since she does not and cannot possess the coercive instruments that are available to the State. Perhaps the only point our interventions should emphasize is that, even in the purely academic hypothesis that this were possible, the Church would not choose to avail itself of such means of coercion. If at any time in history this has not been so, we are very sorry for that and it truly grieves us.

## 6 A Final Observation

The preceding reflections may, in some ways, seem unrealistic. I am glad that I apologized from the start for my lack of competence in the area of institutional communication. The appearance of such little realism is due to the fact that what has been stated appears to forget that many times we must deal with a militant secularism that would have to be confined in the museum of the most unfortunate things of times past. Sometimes, we are faced with unbearable superficiality and with attitudes that are very difficult not to attribute to bad faith. All this may cause pain, at times, severe pain. However, if we want to make a small contribution to the great work

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<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

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of illuminating the world of communication and culture with the light of the Gospel, it is necessary to devise our words and attitudes so that the darkness of the adversary does not take away that luminosity which shines forth from the Christian message, which encompasses the love of freedom, the sincere search for truth, the respect for the autonomy of the temporal, the attention to the objective consistency of criticism, and magnanimous friendship toward all people.