



Most Reverend Raymond J. Boland

Bishop Emeritus

Diocese Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Catholic Press Association Eastern Regional Conference

Communications is one Ministry
New York, New York ~ September 1994

I am grateful for this opportunity to share with you some of the impressions I have gained during my three-year term as Chairman of the Bishops' Committee on Communications -- a term which will come to an end at the Bishops' Washington meeting in November this year.

Whatever else its value the Committee Chairmanship gives one an ideal perch from which to view the multiple ways in which the Church involved -- or sometimes, not involved -- in communicating the gospel message. One is readily persuaded that *Communications is one Ministry* but in our age of specialization and constant change just keeping up-to-date in one's own area of expertise is considered an achievement. Indeed, when budgets are constrained and expenses keep rising the allocated diocesan media dollar often becomes the source of competition rather than cooperation.

We must constantly keep in mind why we are in the apostolate. I say apostolate very deliberately because there is a vocational aspect to being a Catholic professional communicator which makes it something far more than merely a business.

Back in the early 1950s, the comedian Milton Berle had a Tuesday night television program on NBC which was sponsored by Texaco. Nobody could compete with his popularity until Fulton Sheen and his *Life is Worth Living* program came along. Asked about his eclipse by Sheen, Berle joked that Sheen had better writers -- Matthew, Mark, Luke and John.[\(1\)](#)

It may be trite but our task is still the same today. As essential background we have a trinity of documents since the second Vatican Council which add substance to the obligation and the ways and means of doing this. Very early in the Council the participants realized that access to the "good news" was critical if their deliberations were to have any influence in the marketplace. The Council, too, and somewhat unexpectedly, had become a media event and despite its four long sessions every day produced summaries and evaluations in the world's secular press. As early as December 1963, Pope Paul VI put his signature on the short council document entitled *Inter Mirifica* which repeated the mandate that, "The Catholic Church has been commissioned by the Lord Christ to bring salvation to every man. . .and, therefore, claims as a birthright the use and possession of all instruments (of communication) which are necessary. . .for the formation of Christians and for every activity undertaken on behalf of man's salvation."[\(2\)](#)

Eight years later, as was called for by the Council, a more detailed document was issued by the Vatican. It was entitled *Communio Et Progressio* and here the reporting of Matthew, Mark, Luke and John was consolidated in one press release as follows: "While he was on earth, Christ revealed himself as the perfect communicator. Through his 'incarnation' he utterly iden-

tified himself with those who were to receive his communication and he gave his message not only in words but in the whole manner of his life. He spoke from within, that is to say, from out of the press of his people. He preached the divine message without fear or compromise. He adjusted to his people's way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And he spoke out of the predicament of his time."[\(3\)](#)

Two years ago, somewhat overwhelmed by the on-going revolution in communications technology, the Church issued *Aetatis Novae* which urgently called for every National Conference of Bishops and every diocese to establish a Pastoral Plan not only to ensure that all pastoral initiatives have a communications component but also that all involved in the field of communications would themselves have an organized overview of the challenges facing the Church in these latter years of a dying century so that, as in the past, "the Spirit (may help) the Church interpret the signs of the times and carry out its prophetic tasks" [\(4\)](#) using to its fullest those new and extraordinary technological advances which are, in their own way, "gifts of God." This summer I visited Iona, the isolated monastic retreat founded by St. Columba in the sixth century. It is believed that it was on this island that the profusely illustrated gospel book of Kells was scripted, the work of at least five scribes and the work of a generation. This was Matthew, Mark, Luke and John in the ninth century, as were the salvific messages on the stone crosses which were the only tool the religious educator of his time could use to enrich his remembrance of the oral tradition of the man from Galilee. In those days, it was easier to see that "Communications (was) is one ministry!"

You are probably aware that the Bishop's Committee for Communications has adopted the task of developing a National Pastoral Plan for the United States in response to the call of *Aetatis Novae*. The first draft is currently in preparation but, like the Book of Kells, don't be surprised if it takes a number of years for discussion and refinement before approval by the Conference of Bishops. The process is, of course, extremely valuable in itself and, if communications technology keeps up its rapid pace, the conclusions will become dated the day they are signed.

In this regard, I was delighted to note that your president, Anthony Spence, has called upon the CPA to sponsor a long range plan for the association. This is no longer a luxury: it is a necessity. When Bishop John England found the United States Catholic Miscellany in 1822, he was not worried about radio, television, satellites or fiber optics. He was worried about finances and distribution not to mention the anti-Catholicism of the post-colonial Carolinas.

If Communications is one ministry, then it becomes essential for all involved to understand the role of the other and to foster that sense of supportive cooperation and interdependence, which increases coverage while husbanding resources.

The Catholic Press in the United States is better established than in any country in the Catholic world. In many places, it has modernized its technology, increased its circulation and improved its distribution. Nevertheless, one has to be concerned by the demise of the newspaper in so many secular markets. Major cities which once supported a number of daily papers with a variety of viewpoints are now reduced to one, often owned by a conglomerate which dictates policy far from the community being covered. Is there a message for us in a newspaper like USA Today, which gives us a three or four line coverage for every state of the Union and is basically a rapid-fire TV show on newsprint? Has the reading public been seduced by CNN, which promises the world in thirty minutes? If sixty million of our population are functionally illiterate, meaning, they cannot read, it is easy to understand that they will not pick up a diocesan news-

paper. In many dioceses, the diocesan newspaper is either partially or fully subsidized by a mandated quota system. While this serves its purpose admirably from a revenue-producing point of view it has one major flaw. It makes it difficult to predict how many subscribers would actually purchase the paper, I might say, on its own merits, that is, how many readers would actually get upset if it was not delivered for a few weeks. I know what I am asking is the most difficult statistic to develop, namely, how many people actually read the paper? The problem is not exclusive to the print media. The cable television channels will tell you that they have access to so many million homes. This does not mean that of these millions everybody or even anybody ever tunes in that particular channel. The Nielson Ratings are probably the most sophisticated system we have to come up with a comparatively reliable measurement but their use is normally confined to commercial television.

I need hardly to remind you that competition for one's reading time has increased dramatically in recent years. The advent of desk-top publishing has flooded our homes and offices with a vast array of newsletters, some of which are attractively produced and eye-catching. In an effort to retain their market share our multi-sectionalized daily newspapers are, to my mind, less and less news and more and more magazine. This is the competition the Catholic press faces and we must be willing to learn from the successes and the failures of such competition.

Liturgies are effective when all involved perform their roles to perfection. The same happens when the various diocesan communications components work together in support of each other. The role of the Catholic newspaper is distinct from diocesan use of the electronic media or the diocesan public relations office but they must all be modern counterparts of what Matthew, Mark, Luke and John were for the Church in its infancy. Communications is one ministry.

There is one area in which Catholic-sponsored media can play a leading role and that is in the development of what I would term Media-Ethics. The media in our country are blamed for a great deal and it is easy to turn them into a scapegoat, sometimes unfairly. The freedom of the press, like freedom of religion, is constitutionally guaranteed and I would submit that the exercise of any freedom should be synonymous with responsibility if the right to that freedom is to retain the respect of those who value its existence. Our rights are sometimes diluted by legal restrictions which are often the inevitable result of a lack of responsibility by the few but this, of course, is part of the process of our society's quest for civilized refinement. Nobody wants to see the freedom of the press curtailed but calls for such are often sparked by irresponsible journalism such as blatantly inaccurate and unchecked reporting, unwillingness to acknowledge and adequately correct errors, lack of balance in presenting an issue and a determination not to be influenced by the other side of the story. Sensitivities are often very subjective but I sometimes wonder about the professionalism of those media personnel who would callously invade the privacy of individuals who have been traumatized by unexpected grief or personal stress. I don't think ethics and good manners should be jettisoned because of an imminent deadline or a possible scoop of dubious value. This only introduces a "dog eat dog" mentality into the profession of journalism. Most Catholic press journalists are immune from some of these pressures because our publications are usually weekly ones: we don't get too many scoops, sometimes not even the name of the new or long-awaited bishop! The Catholic journalist, however, belongs to a faith tradition which knows the frailties of human nature but at the same time is aware of the dignity of every human being. Art, drama, culture and our mundane day-to-day struggles to find order amid disorder, peace amid distress and serenity amid turmoil are reflections of the human life's interplay with divine grace. The Catholic journalist is in a truly unique position to explore the ethic which best opens the call of Christ to the wider audience in a way which respects the truth and the ultimately enhances the human spirit.

In recent years not a few Catholic leaders have expressed everything from outrage to disappointment relative to the way religious news is reported in the secular media. One hears the words -- bias, prejudice and bigotry -- and, I've no doubt, such still exists in some cases. However, maybe the operative word should be "ignorance."

Allow me to make a distinction here. We cannot blame the reporter if the news-maker is the one who is ignorant. During the recent Health Care debate in Congress a certain congressman appearing on national television said the church had no right to be involved in the process. There was no doubt that he meant the Catholic Church because he was frustrated by our contention that the unborn have a right to life. Was this bias or ignorance? I was under the impression that the Penal Laws against Catholics participating in the political process went out with the American Revolution -- even though the No Nothings of the last century were slow in getting the message. It was an astounding statement from a presumably well-educated civic leader but in recent years not a few elected and appointed leaders in very responsible posts have diminished their positions by making statements about the Church which were so inaccurate as to be frightening. Maybe it is an indictment of our system of education, which has tried so hard to be "religion-neutral" that it has only succeeded in producing talented people who are religiously ignorant.

The other half of the distinction is confined to those who cover the religion page. Now, I will be the first to admit that the transcendent nature of the gospel message, indeed, of all theology, is sometimes difficult to express in a short, neatly-crafted paragraph or an edited five-second television spot. It is hard to put the intangible in a box. Faith is often alien to rational analysis. Mystery is still mystery no matter how long you take to hammer it down at the edges. The Jesuit, Father Avery Dulles, highlights no less than seven points of contrast in this regard in his masterful paper, *Religion and the News Media: A Theologian Reflects* delivered at the FATICA Symposium in Chicago last June.⁽⁵⁾ However, all this only makes it more imperative that those who cover religion for the media should be well-grounded and highly-knowledgeable in the subtleties of theological definition and the nuances of religious differences. There is also a certain sacredness involved which should not be readily derided even if it is somewhat inexplicable to the outsider.

There are some first-class religion reporters and editors in this country and many of them cover the Bishops' meetings each year. For three years, I have attended between 30 and 40 of these press conferences and it is a pleasure to watch them work and later to examine their resultant columns in our major national dailies. These few, however, are the exception.

In my travels, I have encountered so-called religion reporters who do not know the first thing about Catholicism. Now, it is not that Catholics are some tiny cult hibernating on a mountaintop having convinced themselves that the end is near! In the United States, we number over fifty million and our teaching is not esoteric mumbo-jumbo. Catechisms are readily available from the penny variety of yesteryear to the \$19.95 paperback *New Catechism*. In other words, there is really no excuse for some of the inaccuracies which sometimes grace the religion pages of the secular press. I doubt if any self-respecting publisher or editor would tolerate the same standard of performance from those who cover sports or finance or real estate.

Is there anything that can be done about this? Let me offer a few recommendations to those of you who serve the Church as communicators.

1. Bigotry, where it truly exists, should be counteracted immediately. Otherwise, it may take on the mantle of plausibility and infect future generations.
2. Ignorance should be gently corrected and readily forgiven. Such reaction will generally dispose the culprit to be more careful in the future.
3. We must be careful not to become too thin-skinned or prissy imagining ulterior motives behind every little criticism of the Church.
4. Let's not overreact. It doesn't take a steamroller to flatten a daisy. Overreaction can sometimes give what is objectionable that publicity which it sometimes craves but never deserves.
5. Let's be careful in the way we refer to other religions and always depict them both accurately and with respect.
6. Let's get it into our heads once and for all that the secular media generally live by the opposite of the old adage, "no news is good news" - in other words, for them "good news is no news." Eleanor Porter's Pollyanna was never the editor of a city desk.
7. Strange as it may seem to us at times, even those who may disagree vehemently with our stands on various issues often have a solid regard for our teaching. We are, however, a human institution and we are not impeccable. When we fall from grace it is news and, although it may be a source of anguish for us, we should reflect on the fact that if it were not news the underlying implication would be far worse. If we were all confirmed in grace there would be no sinners and if there were no sinners we would not need a Church. Nobody likes to have the finer of accusation pointed in his direction but, as in Luke's eternal narrative of the Prodigal, there are times when we have to beat our breasts, to pick up the pieces and return to the Waiting Father.
8. Lest I be accused of being a kill-joy by concentrating on those elements of media presentation which upset us, I would like to challenge you to recognize the potential of the media to spread the "good news," to enable Christ's invitation to all humankind to reverberate from satellite to satellite, from page to page, from video to video reechoing the message of the evangelists. It has taken two thousand years but we now have the technical capability to relay Christ's voice and to be his witnesses "even to the uttermost parts of the earth" as he asked when he promised the Spirit to his disciples and all who would follow in their footsteps. I found this message clearly enunciated in two insightful pastoral letters by Carlo Cardinal Martini of Milan. Now available in the English language, the Archbishop calls for the spiritual renewal of one of the largest archdioceses in the world -- 1,000 parishes, five million Catholics -- by meditating on the scriptural basis for communications, personal and interpersonal, ancient and modern. His two pastoral letters *Effata, Apriti!* dealing with the Lord's cure of the man who could neither hear nor speak and *Il Lembo Del Mantello*, detailing the healing power of Christ which changed the life of the women who merely sought to touch his garment, are in themselves a reaffirmation that Communications is one ministry.[\(6\)](#)

9. We must be particularly conscious of our young Catholics. Unlike those of my vintage, they have been in the age of television. The TV set has been their babysitter. The TV set has been their educator often at variance with the values of their parents and their teachers. Even those vigilant parents who have been able to shield them from the excesses of violence, crude language and depictions of promiscuous sexual encounters served up so frequently as entertainment, know deep in their hearts that they cannot compete with the desensitization which comes from an overdose of valueless television fare.

9. There is a story about a man and his wife who lived in a tiny cottage. The husband arrived home from the village one day with a live goat. He was immediately challenged by his wife, "Where are we going to keep him?"

"We'll keep him in the bedroom," the husband replied.

10.

1 "But what about the smell," she protested.

"Oh, he'll get used to that," was the husband's rejoinder.

Too many of our young people have become desensitized. They have become used to lifestyles without values. They are so used to the "smell" that their ability to be critical, to be selective, to separate good from evil has been atrophied. Therein lies the challenge of the dedicated Catholic communicator - to capture their attention and then to re-sharpen their desire to push aside the dross in the search for all that is good and true and beautiful.

In May of this year, Ted Koppel of ABC News' "Nightline" gave the commencement address at Catholic University's graduation in Washington, D.C. He critiqued his own profession and industry in the context of values.

In his conclusion, what he said to the graduates could also be taken as a recommendation to those of us involved with communications.

2

3 *There have always been imperfect role models, false gods of material success and shallow fame. But now their influence is magnified by television. I caution you, as one who performs daily on that flickering altar, to set your sights beyond what you can see. There is true majesty in the concept of an unseen power that can neither be measured nor weighed. There is harmony and inner peace to be found in following a moral compass that points in the same direction regardless of fashion or trend. There is hope that if we can only set our course according to man's finest aspirations, we can achieve what we all want, and that we can have it without diminishing our neighbor's share. (7)*

4

5 Let me conclude by saying a few words about our sponsors.

I am aware that this conference is being sponsored by the Christophers as they celebrate their 50th Anniversary. When Father James Keller articulated the two principles which have remained the philosophy of the Christophers since 1945, he did not have to look to far to find inspiration. Marking, as it did, the end of the Second World War, 1945 was the year when the gates of Auschwitz and Buchenwald were opened to reveal the horrors of the Holocaust. It was the year when atomic bombs destroyed Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was the year of George Orwell's *Animal Farm*. The worth and the uniqueness of the human person was of

minimal importance in a war-weary society.

Father Keller lit his candle and declared, "There is nobody like you and, you can make a difference."

These too maxims fortified by the motto, "better to light one candle than to curse the darkness" became the common thread running through all the media programs sponsored by the Christophers over the past 50 years. With an appeal which goes far beyond the Catholic world the well-known *Christopher News Notes* is a monthly injection of inspiration in clear, concise terms bolstered by vignettes of human interest which elicit the conclusion, "even I could do that."

I have often wondered if our present Holy Father, John Paul II, knows about the Christophers in Poland because all of his writings as bishop and pope return to the same theme -- the dignity of the human person, uniquely created by God in his own image and likeness.

Times have changed and in some areas of human endeavor there have been gains. But, we still have a deprived Third World crying out for justice. We still have some societies where the womb has become a killing place and where those who are old and sickly are considered expendable. We sometimes play with words to massage our consciences.

In congratulating the Christophers for their 50 years of witness to the Judeo-Christian ethic that all life is sacred and all who live can serve and, in so doing, make a difference, I want to indicate to Father John Catoir and his associates and supporters that your task has only just begun. May this anniversary celebration be merely the pause which invigorates your movement for the new millennium. I like to think of the Christophers as those who create tiny miracles which are a reflection of a God who cares.

Footnotes

1. *Religious Radio and Television in the United States, 1921-1991*. Hal Erickson, 1992, p. 169.
2. *Inter Mirifica*, Vatican Council, Rome December 4, 1963. Chapter 1:3.
3. *Communio Et Progressio*, Rome, 1971, Part 1, Section 11.
4. *Aetatis Novae*, Rome, February 22, 1992, Conclusion, 22.
5. *Religion and the News Media: A Theologian Reflects*, Avery Dulles, SJ, Fatica Symposium, Chicago, Illinois, June 10, 1994, pp. 3-5.
6. *Communicating Christ to the World*, Carlo Maria Martini, trans. by Thomas M. Lucas, SJ, Sheed and Ward, 1994.
7. Commencement Address, Ted Koppel, Catholic University of America, Washington, D.C., May 14, 1994, p. 4.