



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 14th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Social Communications and Family "

[Sunday, 18 May 1980]

Beloved brothers and sisters in Christ,

It is in obedience to a direction of the Second Vatican Council that the Catholic Church celebrates (on the 18th of May) the World Day of Social Communications. In one of its first Documents, the Council ordered that a day should be set aside each year in all the dioceses of the world, and that on that special day the faithful should pray for a particular intention, namely, that the Church's work in the field of communications might be effective. In addition, each one was to reflect on his own duties regarding the communications media and to make a contribution for the support of the Church's social communications establishments and undertakings.

In the years since the Council's Decree on the Social Communications Media, the World Day has come to be an increasingly important event in the Church's life. In many countries, Catholics have been joined by the members of other Christian communities in the celebration; a practical manifestation of solidarity admirably in keeping with the ecumenical principle "not to do separately what we can do together". Let us thank God for it.

This year, in harmony with the theme of the coming Synod of Bishops which will be considering the problems confronting the family in the changed circumstances of modern times, we are invited to focus our reflection on the relationship between the mass media and the family. One circumstance which intimately affects all families today is the prevalence of the social communications media: the press, the cinema, the radio, and television. It is a rare home indeed to which entry has not been gained by one or other of these. Where once, not very long ago, the family consisted of parents and children with the addition, perhaps, of a relative or two or a

servant, now the circle is, in a sense, extended to admit the more or less permanent "company" of announcers, newsreaders, entertainers, commentators on sport and current affairs, with frequent visits as well from famous and influential people of every nationality, persuasion and profession.

It is a state of affairs with very great potential for good, but also with built in risks that may not be disregarded. The family of today suffers its share of the strong tensions and of the growing disorientation which is affecting modern social life in general. Certain of the stabilizing factors which in the past helped to ensure its solid internal cohesion have now been diminished or have altogether disappeared. Formerly, there were compelling reciprocal interests and the demands of tasks in which every member had to take part, to keep the family together in almost uninterrupted community throughout the working hours, thus permitting it to play a decisive part in the training and education of the children. In today's altered working conditions, however, the members of the family are often widely separated from each other for the greater part of the day.

The obvious difficulties of this situation can be seriously aggravated by the communications media. If media programmes frequently present a distorted picture of what a family is, or caricature family life, or if they misrepresent or play down the family's function as an educator; members of the family, accepting these distortions passively and uncritically, may quite easily begin to imitate the conduct and adopt the attitudes presented to them notwithstanding its deficiencies or superficiality. It may not occur to them to question the values implied, nor may they have the opportunity or the capacity, even if they do, to challenge the producers or to engage in constructive dialogue with them on the issues. There is the further risk, - it is real and great, - that the family may abdicate the responsibility which rightly belongs to it of shaping the children's attitudes to life and training their sense of values, and may cede it unwittingly to the media.

In this connection, it is wise to be alert to the growing influence which the mass media, and especially television, are exercising on the developing minds of the young, particularly as regards their vision of man, of the world and of relationships with others; for the vision furnished them by the media often differs profoundly from that which the family would wish to transmit to them. Parents, in many cases, do not show sufficient concern about this. Generally, they pay vigilant attention to the type of friends with whom their children associate, but do not exercise a similar vigilance regarding the ideas which the radio, the television, records, papers and comics carry into the "protected" and "safe" intimacy of their homes. And so the mass media often enter the lives of the youngest members of the family with no possibility of the necessary explanations or corrections from parents or other educators which could neutralize any harmful elements and which could equally employ the many valuable aspects to assist in the process by which children are gradually transformed into well-adjusted men and women.

It is undoubtedly true, on the other hand, that the social communications media can be a most valuable source of cultural enrichment for the family and for each of its members. Well-ordered reading, listening and viewing can contribute greatly to the stimulation of dialogue and interchange

within the little community, and can create a broadening of interests which will involve the family in the activities of the larger human family outside. Through the media, a certain participation is also frequently made possible in religious events occurring in distant places, something which is a special comfort to the sick and the housebound in particular. The family's consciousness of the universality of the Church, and its awareness of the problems of all races and peoples becomes more vivid. Thus the media can greatly assist in drawing the hearts of mankind closer together in sympathy, understanding and brotherhood; and the family can acquire a deep and loving "family feeling" for the whole human race. Benefits, these, which should not be underestimated.

But in order that the family may really draw such benefits from its use of the media and at the same time protect itself from any harmful effects, it is necessary that its members, particularly the parents, shall make more active use of their critical faculty. They must take a more searching look at the content of the programmes offered to them. They must exercise judgment on the messages which the media are transmitting to them. Further, the family needs to take a deliberate decision regarding the amount of time it can responsibly afford to spend with the media, taking account of the various other activities and tasks which it must attend to.

In short: it is the duty of parents to educate themselves, and to educate their children, to appreciate the value of communication, to make an intelligent choice between the programmes available to them, and then, having made that choice, to make a reasonable and conscious judgment as to whether the message coming from the program merits to be accepted or rejected. In families where this kind of control is exercised, the media will be less a danger to the well-being and proper functioning of the home, but will, on the contrary, be a valuable aid in preparing the gradually maturing younger members to take their place in society.

It is evident that the family needs to be able to count on the good will and integrity, as also on the sense of responsibility, of the media professionals, the publishers, editors, writers, the producers and directors of the broadcasting media, the dramatists, commentators, entertainers, newsmen and women. All these are categories in which the laity are predominant. To all of them men and women, I want to repeat something which I said last year in one of my journeys abroad: "The great forces which shape the world, - politics, the mass media, science, technology, culture, education, industry and work, - are precisely the areas where lay people are specially competent to exercise their mission" (Limerick, October 1, 1979). Undoubtedly, mass media is one of the great forces which is shaping the world at this moment, and it is in the field of mass media that increasing numbers of talented and highly trained people are finding their lifework and vocation. The Church thinks of them today with love and concern and earnestly prays for them all. There are few vocations which make such demands on the energy, the dedication, the integrity and the conscience of a man or woman as are made by a profession in the media. At the same time, and let this not be forgotten, the truly dedicated professional communicator of today can be a force for good in the world which has few parallels.

I earnestly invite all media workers, therefore, to join us in the Church's day of reflection and prayer. We beg the Almighty together to deepen their consciousness of the tremendous opportunity which is theirs to serve mankind and shape the world towards good. We ask Him to endow them with the understanding, wisdom and courage which they will always need in bearing their awesome responsibility. We beg Him to keep them always intensely mindful of their audiences, which for the most part are families like their own, with overworked parents often too tired to be alert, and with children who are trusting, impressionable, vulnerable, easily led. For remembering this, they will keep in mind also the enormous consequences which their work may have for good or ill and will not easily be false to themselves or to the principles of their noble calling.

My special Apostolic Blessing goes today to all mass media workers, to all families, and to all those who search through prayer, reflection and consultation to put the communications media to the best use for the service of man and the greater glory of God.

From the Vatican, 1 May 1980

IOANNES PAULUS PP. II