



The Holy See

MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II FOR THE 38th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"The Media and the Family: A Risk and a Richness "

[Sunday, 23 May 2004]

*Dear Brothers and Sisters,*1. The extraordinary growth of the communications media and their increased availability has brought exceptional opportunities for enriching the lives not only of individuals, but also of families. At the same time, families today face new challenges arising from the varied and often contradictory messages presented by the mass media. The theme chosen for the 2004 World Communications Day – “The Media and the Family: A Risk and a Richness” - is a timely one, for it invites sober reflection on the use which families make of the media and, in turn, on the way that families and family concerns are treated by the media. This year’s theme is also a reminder to everyone, both communicators and those whom they address, that all communication has a moral dimension. As the Lord himself has said, it is from the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks (cf. Mt 12:34-35). People grow or diminish in moral stature by the words which they speak and the messages which they choose to hear. Consequently, wisdom and discernment in the use of the media are particularly called for on the part of communications professionals, parents and educators, for their decisions greatly affect children and young people for whom they are responsible, and who are ultimately the future of society.2. Thanks to the unprecedented expansion of the communications market in recent decades, many families throughout the world, even those of quite modest means, now have access in their own homes to immense and varied media resources. As a result, they enjoy virtually unlimited opportunities for information, education, cultural expansion, and even spiritual growth - opportunities that far exceed those available to most families in earlier times. Yet these same media also have the capacity to do grave harm to families by presenting an inadequate or even deformed outlook on life, on the family, on religion and on morality. This power either to reinforce or override traditional values like religion, culture, and family was clearly seen by the Second Vatican Council, which taught that “if the media are to be correctly employed, it is essential that all who use them know the principles of the moral order and apply them faithfully” (*Inter Mirifica*, 4). Communication in any form must always be inspired by the ethical criterion of respect for the truth and for the dignity of the human person.3. These considerations apply in particular to the treatment of the family in the media. On the one hand, marriage and family life are frequently depicted in a sensitive manner, realistic but also sympathetic, that celebrates virtues like love, fidelity, forgiveness, and generous self-giving for others. This is true also of media presentations which recognize the failures and disappointments inevitably experienced by married couples and families - tensions, conflicts, setbacks, evil choices and hurtful deeds - yet at the same time make

an effort to separate right from wrong, to distinguish true love from its counterfeits, and to show the irreplaceable importance of the family as the fundamental unit of society. On the other hand, the family and family life are all too often inadequately portrayed in the media. Infidelity, sexual activity outside of marriage, and the absence of a moral and spiritual vision of the marriage covenant are depicted uncritically, while positive support is at times given to divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality. Such portrayals, by promoting causes inimical to marriage and the family, are detrimental to the common good of society.⁴ Conscientious reflection on the ethical dimension of communications should issue in practical initiatives aimed at eliminating the risks to the well-being of the family posed by the media and ensuring that these powerful instruments of communication will remain genuine sources of enrichment. A special responsibility in this regard lies with communicators themselves, with public authorities, and with parents. Pope Paul VI pointed out that professional communicators should “know and respect the needs of the family, and this sometimes presupposes in them true courage, and always a high sense of responsibility” (*Message for the 1969 World Communications Day*). It is not so easy to resist commercial pressures or the demands of conformity to secular ideologies, but that is what responsible communicators must do. The stakes are high, since every attack on the fundamental value of the family is an attack on the true good of humanity. Public authorities themselves have a serious duty to uphold marriage and the family for the sake of society itself. Instead, many now accept and act upon the unsound libertarian arguments of groups which advocate practices which contribute to the grave phenomenon of family crisis and the weakening of the very concept of the family. Without resorting to censorship, it is imperative that public authorities set in place regulatory policies and procedures to ensure that the media do not act against the good of the family. Family representatives should be part of this policy-making. Policy-makers in the media and in the public sector also must work for an equitable distribution of media resources on the national and international levels, while respecting the integrity of traditional cultures. The media should not appear to have an agenda hostile to the sound family values of traditional cultures or the goal of replacing those values, as part of a process of globalization, with the secularized values of consumer society.⁵ Parents, as the primary and most important educators of their children, are also the first to teach them about the media. They are called to train their offspring in the “moderate, critical, watchful and prudent use of the media” in the home (*Familiaris Consortio*, 76). When parents do that consistently and well, family life is greatly enriched. Even very young children can be taught important lessons about the media: that they are produced by people anxious to communicate messages; that these are often messages to do something - to buy a product, to engage in dubious behaviour - that is not in the child’s best interests or in accord with moral truth; that children should not uncritically accept or imitate what they find in the media. Parents also need to regulate the use of media in the home. This would include planning and scheduling media use, strictly limiting the time children devote to media, making entertainment a family experience, putting some media entirely off limits and periodically excluding all of them for the sake of other family activities. Above all, parents should give good example to children by their own thoughtful and selective use of media. Often they will find it helpful to join with other families to study and discuss the problems and opportunities presented by the use of the media. Families should be outspoken in telling producers, advertisers, and public authorities what they like and dislike.⁶ The media of social communications have an enormous positive potential for promoting sound human and family values and thus contributing to the renewal of society. In view of their great power to shape ideas and influence behaviour, professional communicators should recognize that they have a moral responsibility not only to give families all possible encouragement, assistance, and support to that end, but also to exercise wisdom, good judgement and fairness in their presentation of issues involving sexuality, marriage and family life. The media are welcomed daily as a familiar guest in many homes and families. On this World Communications Day I encourage professional communicators and families alike to acknowledge this unique privilege and the accountability which it entails. May all engaged in the field of

communications recognize that they are truly “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” (*Address to Communications Specialists*, Los Angeles, 15 September 1987, 8). And may families always be able to find in the media a source of support, encouragement and inspiration as they strive to live as a community of life and love, to train young people in sound moral values, and to advance a culture of solidarity, freedom and peace. *From the Vatican, 24 January 2004, the Feast of Saint Francis de Sales. IOANNES PAULUS PP. II*

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