



# The Holy See

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**ADDRESS OF JOHN PAUL II  
TO THE PLENARY ASSEMBLY  
OF THE PONTIFICAL COMMISSION  
FOR SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS**

*Friday, 1 March 1991*

*Dear Brother Bishops,*

*Dear Brothers and Sisters in Christ,*

1. I am pleased to meet once more the members and staff of the *Pontifical Council for Social Communications*, on the occasion of your annual Plenary Assembly. At these meetings in the past I have often referred to the providential nature of the Second Vatican Council's attention to the means of social communication. Their importance for "the spread and strengthening of God's kingdom", as well as for "the advancement of the human family as a whole", gives them a special place in the Church's mission and missionary endeavours (*Inter Mirifica*, 2).

2. In the recent Encyclical "*Redemptoris Missio*", I compared the *world of communications* to the first "Areopagus of the modern age", taking the Areopagus where Saint Paul preached in Athens (*Act. 17, 22-31*) as a symbol of the new sectors in which the Gospel must be proclaimed (Ioannis Pauli PP. II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 37). The fact that the means of social communication have become the chief sources of information and education, of guidance and inspiration, at the level of individual, family and social behaviour, invites the members of the Church clearly to recognize their importance. Not only is the Church's presence needed in the media in order to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel, but it is especially necessary in order to ensure that the Gospel message is integrated into the "new culture" being created by modern communications. This task is all the more urgent in so far as the world of the communications media often affords an example of the split between the Gospel and culture, which Pope Paul VI called "the tragedy of our time" (Pauli VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 20).

I recall these reflections in order to underline the relevance and significance of your responsibilities within the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and the Council's role in the Church's evangelizing and missionary tasks. I wish to encourage you to continue to give the best of your commitment and talent to meeting the challenges facing the Church in this field.

3. Your present Plenary Meeting commemorates the Twentieth Anniversary of the Pastoral Instruction "Communio et Progressio", which was published in response to an explicit request of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council (*Inter Mirifica*, 23). You have been completing the work of updating that Document, an "aggiornamento" aimed at responding to new situations and new technologies. At the same time, you have seen that the basic principles of "*Communio et Progressio*" remain as valid and as vital today as they were two decades ago.

The changes in technology and indeed in society to which you are addressing yourselves include the fact that the media now make it possible for people everywhere to witness events as they occur. Nevertheless, the way in which events are perceived often depends on the views of those who control the flow of information and possess the technical means to broadcast it. In this area, "*Communio et Progressio*" offered guidelines that are of great value for society in the use of the communications media.

Recalling that "modern man cannot do without information that is full, consistent, accurate and true" (Pontificii Consilii de Communicationibus Socialibus, *Instr. pastoralis Communio et Progressio*, 34), the Pastoral Instruction asserts that "society, at all levels, requires information *if it is to choose the right course . . .*; (information) is essential to the public interest" (*Ibid.* 35). Appropriately, in view of the ethical principles involved, the Pastoral Instruction goes on to state: "The right to information is not limitless. It has to be reconciled with other existing rights. There is the right of truth which guards the good name both of men and of societies. There is the right of privacy which protects the private life of families and individuals. There is the right of secrecy which obtains if necessity or professional duty or the common good itself require it. Indeed, whenever public good is at stake, discretion and discernment and careful judgment should be used in the preparation of news" (*Ibid.* 42).

4. All of this takes on particular relevance against the background of the grave situation of the Middle East. It can well be said that the current conflict has been waged not only with the weapons of war but also, to some degree, through the media. While the means of social communication have been instrumental in keeping the world informed of events, we have also seen that where respect for the truth is lacking they can be a powerful force for injustice.

In relation to all situations of violence, it is timely to recall, twenty years after they were written, certain words of concern contained in "*Communio et Progressio*" about the difficult and responsible role of men and women of the media. "The safety of such correspondents", the Pastoral Instruction says, "should be man's right to know about what is happening. This is

particularly true in the case of wars - which involve and concern the whole human race. So the Church utterly condemns the use of violence against newsmen or against anyone involved in the passing on of news. For these persons vindicate and practise the right of finding out what is happening and of passing on this information to others" ((Pontificii Consilii de Communicationibus Socialibus, *Instr. pastoralis Communio et Progressio*, 34).

The reporting of war, and the dramatic scenes of human suffering and material destruction which accompany it, ought to spur us to pray unceasingly for the advent of a just peace and lasting reconciliation between all the parties involved in the Middle East crisis. The instability which war necessarily leaves in its wake should move all believers to implore more intensely still from Almighty God the gift of that peace which the world cannot give (*Jo.* 14, 27).

5. Dear Brothers and Sisters, in concluding, I cannot but express my appreciation for the Pontifical Council's work in coordinating the worldwide satellite transmission of religious ceremonies which take place here in the City of the Apostles Peter and Paul. These telecasts have made it possible for the people of many nations to be united in prayer. They have helped to heighten the awareness of the universal nature of the Church, by making her members present to each other and by transmitting round the globe knowledge of the magisterium of the Successor of Peter. Your work in this field is surely a true apostolate and a magnificent form of service to God's kingdom.

With the prayer that your efforts to promote a better use of the means of social communication in the Church and in society will continue to bear fruit in peace, justice and unity, I commend you to the loving protection of Mary, Mother of the Church, and I gladly impart my Apostolic Blessing.

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