

THE WORD AND THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

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THE MOST evident characteristic of the electronic media — in contrast to oral and printed communication — is that they make present to us living sound and moving images over great distances of time and space. But the electronic media are also an art form that organizes these sounds and images to convey a profound human experience. The ‘media’ are, as well, powerful institutions to which we entrust the selection, re-writing, production and transmission of our messages. Among them we might also include those which design the new technical equipment determining the material form of the message. Finally, the electronic media mean a new ‘audio and visual’ way of thinking which reaches into homes and minds simultaneously, creating a mass popular culture such as the world has never known before.

We recognize the Church as the extension of the Word in history and as essentially a communicating institution. It has been the special genius of Christianity rapidly to make incarnate the human, historical word in the form of communication contemporary with the period. Beginning with St Paul, the disciples of Christ fanned out from Palestine on the system of Roman roads. In the Middle Ages, the Church learned to communicate in the symbol-rich iconography, architecture, and music of that oral-visual period. When the print-medium was introduced, the bible became the first ‘best-seller’.

This translation of the word of God into the new media is never simply the grafting of a traditional message onto the old pattern of communication. The message — what we directly hear, see, and touch — is part of the form of the medium itself. The new media require a new form of symbolic expression, a different catechesis and kerygmatic expression, a different place and time of communication. Also changing is the ‘communicable moment’: that is, the point in our lives and the context in which there is likely to be real listening and a full response of faith and commitment to the word. All this

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implies an often profound transformation in the internal structure and culture of the Church, and a change in the way the Church inserts itself in the society around it.

The Catholic Church is only beginning to make the word truly incarnate in the new electronic media. Indeed, there seems to be an uncommon hesitance regarding its communication just at the time when the Church appears to be losing contact with the post-industrial society. It seems important to ask: 'How is the message which has its origin in God's word reshaped in a new medium of communication?'

In any discussion of change, a central question concerns what is constant and what is modified. We would be tempted to say that the message is always the same; it is simply the medium and the external form of the message which changes. But the message, as we noted, is so thoroughly a part of the oral, print, or audio-visual media that we must look for something more basic as the constant.

Clearly, that which is most fundamental is the Word in history. Also constant is what Lonergan refers to as the prior interior word which 'God speaks to us by flooding our hearts with his love. That prior word pertains, not to the world mediated by meaning, but . . . to the unmediated experience of love and awe'.¹

However, the religious consciousness has a particular pattern of knowing and experiencing meaning, which differentiates it from, for example, the process of knowing in empirical science. As the human consciousness seeks to express the meaning, context, and dimensions of religious experience in communicable terms, the interior word takes on a language and logic which is appropriate for expressing religious experience. It is the lack of awareness of this language and logic in the christian imagination which most often distorts the expressed experience of the word and impedes the faithful translation into the medium.

One might examine various dimensions of the christian imagination; but for the practical purposes of studying the implications of a new medium, the following seem especially important: the basic *language mode*, symbol and parable; the *source*, a revelation rather than self-discovery; the *validating principle of knowledge*, faith; the *function* of the word, transformation toward union with God; the *context of expression*, ritual celebration; and the fundamental *logic*, the paradox of the Incarnation.

¹ Lonergan, Bernard: *Method in Theology* (London, 1972), p. 112.

The language of symbol and parable

Religious language is the expression of personal encounter with God. This language must reveal simultaneously the experience of the interior of the Other, my own interior experience in response to the Other, and the complex inter-actions of these two personal existences. In human encounter, the subjectivity of the other remains hidden to direct sight, sound, and touch. We can grasp the interior consciousness only through the external word, facial expression, and actions. From the frown, the intensity of the eyes, we understand the subjective state of anger, or in the smile we see joy and love. To express the subjective, the personal, in communicable terms, we tend to go to the external symbol.

As Lonergan emphasizes, 'the symbol is an image of a real or imagined object that evokes a feeling or is evoked by a feeling'.² Gestures, facial expressions and human actions are perhaps the most elemental symbols. The hand extended in friendship, the embrace, the kiss, the caress, have established in us from our earliest infancy profound emotional patterns; and to recall the persons involved, or to see these persons in images, calls forth an unconscious reaction which is part of the deepest roots of human desire. The symbol involves metaphor to express total human experience — intense interior feelings, external sensation, intellectual insight — all in one image or parable.

When Isaiah wished to convey the experience of his great vocational encounter with Yahweh, the appropriate language was symbol. The seraphim embroidered on the temple veil take wing, form a choir of praise, and touch the prophet's lips with a burning coal. Yahweh himself appears in the symbolism of royal majesty, conveying the image of pervasive presence. In these symbols, Isaiah communicates a new understanding of the holiness of divine being, and God's demands on his own life. We penetrate, in an undefinable way, both the interior of God and that of the prophet, as well as the unique relationship between them. These established symbols become for all time a powerful imagery, evoking a sense of calling, of consecration, and of purification.

The religious perception sees the world as personal, and all things as manifestations of the subjectivity of the Divinity, leading to an understanding of his interior life. This understanding of God springs not from a metaphysical analysis of being, but from the direct

² *Ibid.*, p 64.

religious experience of God as person. 'God is not, for symbolic consciousness, experienced as *ipsum esse subsistens*, but as the Father of the heavens, source of all things'.³

The great religious archetypal symbols have been based on fundamental human relationships: father, mother, son, spouse. These, better than any other natural symbols, express the experience of personal encounter with God, and call forth the motivations most deeply implanted in the subconscious formation of the personality. The relationship of God with his chosen people is portrayed with the imagery of Yahweh as the spouse who has lifted up Israel and taken her as his beloved. The lapses of faith are seen as the infidelity and prostitution of the wife. In the New Testament, Jesus presents himself poignantly as the good shepherd, the vine sustaining the branches, the friend who sacrifices his life for those he loves.

In the judeo-christian tradition, God is the totally Other. The analogy of being leads to our understanding of God metaphysically as uncaused cause. But in itself this is knowledge of impersonal existence; it cannot express the *meaning* of existence. The analogy of symbolism based on personal religious encounter is an expression of knowledge of reality as personal, and therefore of reality which has a purpose. The symbol helps us to go beyond the direct experience of the perceived situation or objective, and to relate this to ultimate reality: to transcend the immediate experience, and to grasp the transcendent behind and beyond.⁴

We find this symbolic expression of reality pervading the hebrew language. The word *ruach* refers to the experience of the wind, blowing now softly and now violently. But it refers also to man's breath. From this it becomes the principle of life which comes from God and returns to God. It is also the symbol of the activating energy of deity throughout the universe. *Ruach* also designates the subjectivity of man, whereby he is constituted a self. It connotes the mind and seat of emotion. Thus, man's wisdom and intelligence are seen as finding their source in God's wisdom. Wind, breath, and intelligent expression became symbols which enabled the hebrew people to see through and beyond sense-experience to the transcendent, and to unite sense-experience and experience of the transcendent in one single human experience. The ancient Hebrews were perfectly able to analyse the physical dynamics of the wind to drive a boat or mill

³ Bernard, Charles A.: *Théologie Symbolique* (Paris, 1978), p 52.

⁴ Fawcett, Thomas: *The Symbolic Language of Religion* (London, 1970), pp 28-37; Bernard, *Théologie Symbolique*, pp 15-18.

and, at the same time, to experience the wind as symbol revealing the meaning of the universe.

If we are to begin to use religious language in communication, our thought must move at the level of the logic of the biblical cosmic myth which establishes the ultimate meaning of the universe as personal and participatory. 'Myth' in this sense is an essentially symbolic interpretation which establishes the ultimate meaning of the world as personal: that is, as demanding man's responsible participation in it — not simply using it as an object.⁵ The fundamental judeo-christian perception of the universe is outlined in the first eleven chapters of Genesis: the transcendent God as personally intervening in man's history; the relation of person to God, to other persons, and to the natural world; the goodness of all creation and the goodness of man's essential desires; the origins of evil in man's freedom.

The great error of nineteenth-century rationalism — which still lingers on in much religious consciousness today — is to see this as simply bad science or as childish fantasy. By casting a philosophical-theological perception of the world in terms of a historical drama, the uncertainties and dialectical processes are preserved. Genesis subordinates symbolic elements to a definite historical frame: the God of Israel enters into a real human history, and symbolic elements are located within a beginning and end of time.⁶ But by placing this in biblical time and space, it is kept at the existential level, expressing the meaning of existence for all time and all places.⁷ It is a personal drama — God walking in the garden, the devil appearing in the form of the serpent — implying that it is a participatory world which is completed by man and which completes the subjective creativity of man.

Christian theology is rooted in this cosmic myth: Christ as the new Adam, Mary as the new Eve, the tree of the cross referring back to the tree of knowledge of good and evil, Christ by his obedience bringing back what was lost by the disobedience of Adam and Eve, the resurrection and pentecost ushering in a new creation.

An essential aspect of symbolism is the multivalent meaning it possesses. A great religious symbol, expressing dramatically the heart of a fundamental religious insight, keeps unfolding in history with new meaning. The symbolism of the sacrificial son of Abraham and the suffering servant of Yahweh in Isaiah, which surfaces like the

⁵ Fawcett, *op. cit.*, ch 6.

⁶ Lonergan, *op. cit.*, p 306.

⁷ Fawcett, *op. cit.*, pp 105-09.

peak of an unconscious archetype early in the imagery of the jewish people, lies as a dormant seed ready to blossom into the vision of Jesus as the servant giving his life in redemption of man. There is a constant movement of this religious symbolism in history away from a natural religion toward a more spiritual, transcendent understanding of human life.

The significance of this figurative language in the Church's tradition of 'sacred eloquence' is not to pile up titillating metaphors with the soaring bombast of classical baroque style, but to reveal by spiritual insight the presence of Divinity in image and symbol.

The source and validating principle of the word

The christian communicator must be aware that the source of the message is revelation, not a gradual self-discovery by plumbing the depths of our own consciousness. The expression of the word in the message is always imperfect; and christian communication must direct the hearer back to the experience of the source to discover the full, ineffable meaning of the message.

All religious communication is thus a form of spiritual direction, helping the christian community to understand its present spiritual state, the transcendent meaning of every-day experience, and the path towards union with God. The essential requirement for communication, as in all spiritual direction, is to know intimately the life, problems, and the spiritual state of the ecclesial community.

The validity of any message lies in its ability to give meaning and 'results'. But because the christian word concerns ultimate meaning, and points toward a personal relationship with the transcendent source of the universe, its validity is based on faith in the eschatological fulfilment. The temptation of the christian communicator is to argue the validity of the word on the basis of its capacity to solve immediate problems: the recourse for success in life, the source of mental health, upholder of public morals, the elimination of socio-economic injustices, and the almost magical remedy for all personal privations and frustrations. The message indeed must give meaning and hope in all these aspects of the human condition, but only in the context of eschatological design, and by relating them to faith in God's constant and final resolution of history.

The function and context of religious communication

The word which lies within the christian message is never simply an enlightening or convincing explanation, but carries a transforming

power greater than the message itself. The bearers of the word must be aware of the sacred interiority and the sacramental power of the symbols and language with which they are dealing.

The privileged moment of encounter with the Father through the Word, and the moment of personal participation in the drama of the history of salvation, is ritual and sacrament. Much of religious symbolism and language rises out of ritual, and is meaningless unless directly or indirectly related to it. The context of ritual is iconography, sacred music, and architecture. The spoken word is but one aspect of this context, and the message in the christian tradition is never complete unless all of these aspects are seen as inter-related.

The basic logic of paradox in the christian message

Communication within the christian community must take into account the psychological dynamics of the personality — the longing for self-realization and the longing for integration of the family, neighbourhood, ethnic, and national communities which are so closely identified with personal realization. The secular myth promises a restoration of the primeval paradise in terms of linear growth: everything is getting bigger and better, amassing ever more knowledge and ever more power over nature and man.

The logic of the christian word centres all its meaning on a radically different message: the paradox of the new creation only through the cross. Unless the seed fall into the ground and die, it will not bring forth fruit. This is the inevitable result of the incarnation, the presence of transcendence moving in history. The Kingdom of God is made up of the powerless of this world, and in this shedding of power the liberation is achieved.

In how many of our parishes, schools, Catholic professional organizations, youth groups—and religious communities! — are we willing to translate the relentless logic of paradox into the message we preach and live? Most of us, I am afraid, are seduced by the secular myth, and our message is sounding brass.

MAKING THE CHRISTIAN WORD INCARNATE IN THE ELECTRONIC MEDIA

The central question here concerns how these constants which underlie the communication of the word are shaped into the christian message in the new media. Since the message is part of the media itself, one cannot simply drop projectors, microphones, and TV cameras into the middle of the traditional system of internal and external communication of the Catholic Church.

The methodology for adapting the message within new media becomes clearer by tracing schematically the historical changes in the patterns of communication of the Church, from the oral-visual media of the middle ages, the introduction of the print-media in the reformation period, and now the changes that are indicated by the advancing presence of the electronic media.⁸ In each period there are six major inter-related aspects in the pattern of christian communication: the dominant definition of the world view and meaning of life; how individuals discover meaning in life; the key 'communicable moments' when the Church helps individuals to discover meaning and faith; how the Church structures the communication-experience; the social and physical context of communication in the Church; the definition of communicator roles within the Church.

The oral-visual culture of the late middle ages

The Church could assume as the background of its communication in this period that the general view of society regarding man's origin, nature, and destiny was that based on Genesis and elaborated in its own biblical and theological tradition. The pattern of values and ethical norms were at least officially clear and upheld by the political arm. Social position and authority were sanctified by the religious cosmic view.

In this context, one did not have to construct personally the meaning of life amidst a variety of possibilities, but received a definition of the basic questions of man and his destiny in the culture. Christendom was closed to the penetration of different cultural values; and, since the Church was the principal institution involved in education and philosophical reflection, there was little opportunity for the growth of competing world-views. Nevertheless, the atmosphere of freedom to respond or not to God's grace was perhaps greater, because it was a personal, participatory view of the world. There was room for personal forces in the world, and good and evil were seen as flowing from man's free will.

The concept of flow of time was guided by the biblical history of salvation and the movement of the unchanging seasons. The moments of significant encounter with God's grace were situated within the ritual enactment of cosmic time, the liturgical year. The communicative moments were the dramatically celebrated great feasts of the ritual year and the special times of pilgrimage. The Europe of the

⁸ Babin, P. and McLuhan, M.: *Autre homme, autre chrétien à l'âge électronique* (Lyon, 1977).

middle ages was a society of villages and towns, and the whole community — centred on the church and monastery — participated in the communicative moment.

The communication-experience placed little emphasis on individual training in terms of formulae of knowledge to be retained, but rather on the succession of religious celebrations, especially at the times of great liturgical holidays. With the omnipresent imagery of the statuary, architecture, religious processions and other artistic forms, the people lived in a culture of symbolism, and popular theology interpreted the visual as multiple expressions of the sacred pointing constantly to God.

Finally, the persons principally responsible for communication in the Church were priests and religious as leaders in the ritual celebration and as patrons of sacred art.

The introduction of print, the Reformation and the Industrial Revolution

As empirical science became the dominant thought-language mode, and the power of industrial organization for exploiting nature became clear, the perception of reality through symbols as sacred and personal receded. The biblical cosmic vision of the universe was retained, but only to provide a general background structure upholding meaning. God was moved back to the shadowy edges of reality. He became a 'prime mover' that allowed the secondary causes of science, industry and economic growth to operate according to their own laws. Yet the churches remained the *loci* of religious experience.

Individuals discovered personal meaning not by entering a social position established by a sacred order, but by open-ended personal careers in which progress was marked by graduation on the educational ladder, and by higher positions in the industrial-political bureaucracies. Religion was meaningful as a moral foundation holding together 'civilized' society.

In this context, the popular culture did not point to the presence of a personal God in the every-day events of life. To co-exist in a scientific, industrial world, religion had to take on the same reasoned, logical structure, and the *knowledge* of religion became important. Luther and, later, catholic leaders were scandalized at the 'ignorance' of the faith and the 'anarchy' in religious practice. The protestant and catholic reformers saw the print-media as a way of making present the word in a more uniform and intellectual message. The printed word, especially in the bible, became the sacramental revelation of the Word; and in the printed word one could discover

God. The printed catechism, with its formulae to be memorized, ensured that all would be committed to the same faith in all parts of the world. With the print media came the necessity of universal schooling in order to read the scriptures. Religious organizations such as the Jesuits were among the first to introduce highly systematized formal education to ensure that the faith would have an intellectual and logical basis. Some ability to grasp the symbolic mode of religion was maintained by teaching the classical style of rhetoric, poetry and drama.

The village liturgical celebrating community became the parish centred on educating the children in the faith. The sermon became increasingly a means of instruction. The monastic religious life shifted its emphasis from liturgy and contemplation, to form the basis of the great teaching orders and congregations. The preparation of clergy as ritual leaders was no longer sufficient, and seminaries were initiated to train priests to be teachers. The significant communicable moments were the instructional preparation for first Holy Communion, Confirmation, and Matrimony: points of transition and advance in one's life career.

The post-industrial, electronic age

With the development of urban, pluralistic society, the single web of meaning based on the biblical cosmic myth has disappeared almost entirely as a public, societal world view. The culture carries little consciousness of ultimate meanings, and values reflect the mass-popular culture, influenced to a great extent by the electronic media, especially television.⁹ The churches cease to be a significant authority in the public decision-making process, and people do not necessarily seek the meaning of life, or even a place for religious experience, within the traditional churches.¹⁰ Modern communication and open frontiers permit an immense menu of philosophies, cults, and sectarian divisions. The State — so often controlling directly or indirectly the mass media — becomes a major cohesive force and, in some cases, even the cosmic myth for society.

In the absence of a public set of meanings and a loss of confidence in the great organizations such as the churches, which have traditionally established meaning, the individual seeks to map out an

⁹ Gerbner, George: 'Communication and the Social Environment', in *Communication: The Scientific American* (San Francisco, 1972), pp 111-20.

¹⁰ Coleman, John A., S.J.: 'Situation for Modern Faith', in *Theological Studies*, 39, 4 (December 1978), pp 601-32.

intensely personal, intensely 'authentic' world-view, validated by some type of personal 'religious experience'. There is an attraction to the broadly charismatic religions of the Spirit and to mysticisms, especially those of eastern origin. In a post-industrial society, the disciplined, self-made, inner-oriented man is less a role model. Personal meanings are more likely to be worked out in a communal, small-group setting, and in a way that incorporates an ethic of rich sensation and beauty.

The communicable moments when the individual and/or group are open to a crystallization of meaning and to the grace of faith are sporadic, spontaneous, and unpredictable — nothing like the linear, lock-step stages of life-decision in the print-media school era. They are more likely to be moments of life-crisis, when there is a necessity of discovering *some* meaning: moments of awareness of the superficiality of consumer society, or of charismatic group experience.¹¹

The old pedagogy of memorization of formulae established by authoritative teaching bodies may be seen as necessary for the technical aspects of life, but not in matters of authentic faith commitment. The communication-experience is more likely to be based on a dialogue and search which permits personal discovery and which follows the rhythm of the individual, rather than programmed instruction. The young are accustomed to sound and image-media in every aspect of life; and this is the message for which they are noetically coded. The discovery of the word in the small-group context is most effective when audio-visual. The emphasis cannot be on communicating in terms of abstract theological truths, but rather at the level of deeply-felt experiences. In the logic of the audio-visual message, the communicator must first become deeply aware of his experience of a truth in a life-context, and then seek to share feelings, movement, imagery, and sensation of sounds, all in one holistic impression. Although the old medieval sense of symbols as revealing sacred cosmic meaning has been dulled by a technical-scientific world view, symbolic imagery revealing God in interior experience becomes even more important.

Also changing is the place, the time, the type of people responsible for the message, and the potential audience: from the school, the place of the book, to the place of the small informal group; from a rigid time-schedule following the hours of teachers and clergy as instructors, to moments when people want to reflect on a period of

¹¹ Babin and McLuhan, *ibid.*, ch 5.

transition or crisis in life; from priests, teachers, and catechists as religious functionaries, to roles as charismatic spiritual leaders, who give evidence of having themselves had a deep spiritual experience.

The shaping of the message in the electronic media and for the audio-visual culture implies, as in the past, a reorganization of church structure. In parts of the world, such as Latin America, where the word is more widely incarnated in the electronic media, there is a movement toward the small base community as the place of liturgical and faith-expression. Although the Church's use of the mass media is important for making its message present within the public system of values and meanings, the group media are seen as a much better means of developing a sense of personal identity and personal faith in a mass popular culture. Many, like Pierre Babin, are suggesting that the audio-visual, post-industrial era demands a participatory Church, stimulating more horizontal exchange and witness, and much more popular spontaneous religious expression.

The Church must also take into consideration the lack of a general public sense of religious meaning, and the impact of the mass media in the formation of a mass popular culture. With the bombardment of information, opinion and advertising, there is a loss of a personal integrating belief-system, and a tendency to live in a constant agitation of superficial images and emotions, a jumping from one popular trend to another. The response to the sensationalism of the mass media, however, is not a new puritanism or censorship, but education for taste in pleasure, and an awakening through education of a sense of personal awareness and integrating interiority.

A concluding word

It is difficult to lay down formulae as to how the interior word and the constants in the language and logic of religious experience must be made incarnate in the electronic media. Christians are in the midst of this process now, and the outcome will be determined by our responsiveness to human artistic creativity and to the Spirit.

But one thing is certain. We cannot be satisfied with a slipshod half-way reform that only destroys something antique but beautiful. The language of encounter with God is, at its best, a language of love and poetry. We must ensure that the artists, poets, and those with a genius for expressing the symbolic, ritual-based meaning of religious language, are able to express themselves in a truly new creation in terms of the new media.