

# A NEW ICONOGRAPHY: COMMUNICATIONS AND SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE

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**D**URING the many years when I headed a national communications office for the Roman Catholic Church, I came to hate the word ‘publicity’. It suggests manipulation at worst, at best a hope to get free advertising for the unprintable and uninteresting. ‘Church media?’ they would smile indulgently, ‘Oh yes, public relations you mean—a bit of good publicity.’ But the Church has a vested interest in only one matter: the truth, and in showing the truth roundedly. It must open a welcoming door into Christ’s community—hopefully so that people can find how the Church evidences the love of God operative. It must be free, open about its imperfections, full of different ways of trying to say the unsayable totality of truth, humble above all.

In an important sense, being preoccupied with the use of ‘media’ in the Church can distract us from the importance of ‘communication’. They are not the same thing. Media—in the technological sense—are modern, but the most important issues of communication which we are now facing have always been in the Church in one form or another. Using media may be the province of specialists, but considering the issues of communication must concern everyone.

The ability to communicate is not inborn. To communicate is nothing other than learning to use the metaphors by which society models its life—and becoming literate in communication means, to my mind, growing perceptive in the use of models and metaphors. To this there are positively no exceptions: and certainly not the language of prayer. There is no super-language, no sublime frame of reference, which prescind from the vocabulary of images, dreams and symbols which a particular society has evolved. Whatever paradoxes of divine union the mystics experience and find nearly unsayable, it is still the gracious reordering of their own

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personality which they experience, not God himself in his unutterable essence, and new perceptions have still to be integrated in all that the personality knows and communicates.

Our age has a prejudice in favour of what one might term factism: the implied doctrine that everything worth saying could be directly described in simple factual words if only we were clever enough. Prose would eventually replace the ramblings of *Iliad*, *Lear*, *Four Quartets* and *Death in Venice*. The Letter to the Romans could be rewritten with mathematical precision, to avoid the woeful ambivalences and contradictions into which Paul traps himself by speaking of metaphors of love and law-court in almost the same breath. Ultimately, we should not need to waste dreamy evenings exposing ourselves to Beethoven's Late Quartets or the visions of Mondrian—since we will convey their meanings straightforwardly in well-turned sentences: all matter and no art.

The mystics are deficient, according to this fearsome doctrine, only in their training for articulation. The pattern of the divine life may be complex, it implies, but ultimately knowing as we are known will be describing as we are described.

This is nonsense. I contend that factuality is really of quite limited usefulness. It is not the rapportage of current affairs television—the news programmes to which so many people turn in the hope of understanding what is happening in our world—but the realm of dream and of inferences perceived and faithfully imaged which is primal to human experience and contains the real wisdom of our race. Indeed, fact-ism could soon do away with us altogether, if the contention is that facts alone and a brief understanding of human motives will soon enable us to make so convenient a judgment about the nature of true politics and the transactions of nations as to go down with some confidence into Mutually Assured Destruction.

Luckily, fact-ism does not have the world to itself. All the evidence is that the resilient human spirit is already handling the metaphors of our culture in a host of interesting new ways. If those of us who are concerned with spiritual growth will allow that the spiritual and the creative are essential to one another, and strive to make prayer the integrating force of a powerful inner life—if in short we use all the hints which the complexities of modern communication give us for a rich human development of all our faculties of insight and imagination—then a new era is dawning for retreats and spiritual direction.

But first, we need a climate of christian opinion which sees the wonders of communication more richly than just as 'a bit of good publicity'. It is communication properly understood and used which will enable people to see the Eucharist as what it should be: the supreme aesthetic and intellectual encounter of the human mind with its creator and its goal. And from that should grow an integrated vision of the Church's work for humankind. That can be nothing less than this: to help each person attain the fullness of his or her potential in community with others, growing within the scaffolding of Christ's fullness in loving sensitivity.

As a matter of fact, the media age is probably more soaked in the use of metaphors and models for coping with reality than any preceding it. But have the people realised it?

It may seem apparent that pointing a camera at reality and recording it in sound is the fairest and most 'objective' way of representing what our world means. But this is only apparently true. Behind each cameraman is a director, and behind him a producer, managed by an editor and usually too a vast organisation with its own assumptions and codes. Even supposing that the camera did not lie (it does—even in the most basic sense that it does not see as our eye sees) it is in fact never allowed the glorious autonomy to do it. 'Shots' do not simply happen. They are selected.

More: they are planned—and illustrate the general idea of what is relevant and what is not, which the director already has in his mind and in his cultural background. Fair he may try to be, but objective he never is. We may, in other words, appear to look through a window at reality when we watch film and television. In fact, we are looking through the interpreting function of another human mind.

Once, a new generation of producers wanted to attain a greater social realism. They produced an epoch-making film called *Jazz on a Summer Day*. It has no commentary. The camera appears simply to browse and observe. Far from it. Shots have been cut to match speech and music in such a way as to comment on them. A bandleader speaks of road safety—and the film cuts to a carload of exuberant fans. A jazz musician meditates pretentiously on the intricacies of his art, and the film cuts immediately to a bored and blowzy lady munching on her ice-cream. Connections are everywhere implied and pointed in a way ultimately far more directive than a commentary would have been.

All the studies of news programmes show the same process of interpretation-selection happening. This is not evil. It is simply an inalienable part of human knowing and understanding to organise communication this way. Even the viewing of a programme involves a profound and mysterious metaphor—for what we have come to accept as a representation of reality is in fact a carefully matched patchwork of four-second 'shots' from a variety of angles which a human being could not so quickly occupy without breaking all the norms of space and time!

For it is interpretation, not fact-collecting, which makes the human spirit what it is. If there are, in other words, basic hard reliable facts—tough as snooker balls—with which a whole group of human games can be played, the interest must lie much more in the games than in the balls. Significance always resides in the patterns into which we group events and expectations—and in how these patterns are used as models and maps for extending our experience. They are the maps we have to human destiny. They are primal metaphors, more 'real' than facts alone.

Did not the reformation debates about the human and divine will depend upon the evolution of the joint stock bank in the later middle ages, and the evolution of a more sophisticated credit system able to save people from the misfortunes of ill luck and bad weather? From within that model came other questions—whether we can contribute at all to the divine plan, what part have the merits of the saints, how indulgences can be applied. All these could be meaningfully framed and further explored because the mill of credit had provided a convenient set of categories.

Look at divine scripture and the same applies: Paul's use of the ambivalent myth of Adam, combined with a memory of Jeremiah walking naked through Jerusalem, gave new images for our incorporation in the saviour. The Churches of 'Matthew' and 'John' found very different metaphors of nation, belonging and continuity—even models of the nature of time—to relate their lives to the Kingdom come and yet not come in Jesus. They may have lacked television, but they certainly did not lack dramatic media for playing out the cosmic drama in their lives: the resemblances of method between gospel writer and modern producer are very striking.

The divine revelation can only raise us to union by image and metaphor—not because our knowledge is inadequate or our verbal versatility incomplete, but because the incarnation is God taking

seriously the way in which a beast little lower than the angels has to extend his knowledge of the way things are out of the data of mere experience.

In our century, we have all imbibed as never before in human history an almost unconscious general culture of pictures, music and words which should allow us to sense and to convey new depths of human experience. No one has specifically taught us, yet we all know—more or less—how to appreciate a film and we readily move into depths of emotion over the best television programmes. These awake ‘thoughts that do often lie too deep for tears’, although no announcer comes onto the screen and says, ‘Now this is what this means, and this is what you are supposed to think’. We seem to have found out how to apprehend these things by a lengthy experience of doing it. We know the conventions, ‘get’ the symbols. Watching the cartoon, we know that Jerry does not ever really hurt Tom by squeezing him into a narrow bottle. We know that when we watch or read James Bond, we are not really delighting in slaughter and carnage.

But then, this is no new matter. Those who daily pray the Office know that the journey from death to life, in him who offered not resistance but love to those who hated him, is still modelled in our prayer by chilling cries of victory over our enemies. What matters, and matters still, is that there are some issues so huge that they can only be modelled in human life, death and sacrifice—and the sheer force of love.

The ancient world had many ways of imaging which seem unacceptable now. Historical and critical scholarship have here made a contribution which has hardly at all been assimilated in the parish or prayer group—yet its impact is liberating, widening and humanizing. Television journalists may misunderstand and say (absurdly) that modern evidence is undermining the credibility of the bible. That is fact-ism pure and simple, and adult education will be greatly broadened in the attempt to enter into the experience of the culture of our fathers and mothers in faith. I find that no congregation is rocked on its heels to hear that the Evangelists did not have our sense of accurate reporting, and would often include as report that which they fully knew they had composed in order to bring out the truth of an event. Every film-maker does exactly the same thing.

Words received from the risen Christ could be added to words of Jesus on earth, as though they were all said together: because

the presence of the Risen One was so completely apprehended. Words were then thought often to have a powerful direct effect on reality, before anyone had put their intention into effect. Signs were seen as much more closely allied to the things which they signified than they are now, so that the loss of status symbols, signs of standing and acceptance in society meant much more, and was as serious as suicide.

By rediscovering the mighty tradition of images, ritual and drama which was once the life of the Church before we all became cerebral and factist, we could still build bridges to our media world, and help christian people see that the spiritual life is more than a sort of celestial baccalaureate. It is an enthralling adventure of imagination and self-broadening. Our Bethany retreatants have reacted with real wonder to learn in the enactment of the Passover meal that the reality of the divine life was actually made present when Jews went dramatically through the story of it. Ambiguities, they discover, were deliberately used to enrich meaning and make it more resonant with mystery. So when New Testament writers had to talk about matters which no human being had ever had to express before, they used all these conventions, extending them and using them in new ways. Our christian ancestors were not stupid, or rogues—as some recent television programmes on early Christianity have seemed to imply.

Are we more literal nowadays? In eccentric Britain that is hard to accept. Here is a people which opens its parliament in the person of a jewelled queen with no power, who speaks a speech with which she may not agree, in a chamber of top people who may soon be abolished by those who are symbolically allowed to stand only at their door. In two thousand years, our descendants may wonder at a science which worked on hypotheses based on numbers which we know cannot exist, speculating about particles which may be waves or even just ideas. They may be surprised that we leave our affairs in the hands of governments which frame policies on the basis of totally unproved speculations about economics, while we identify through television for weeks with young people at World Cup and Olympic Games whose triumphs somehow mysteriously advance their countries!

And people hire videos in the evening to extend their experience about things which they cannot do in their own lives. The success of the very businesses whose enterprise pays our living wage depends upon a mythic entity called confidence in the economy.

Symbols and speculations are the very means for the extension of the human mind. Far from being escapist fantasies, they are the veins and sinews of reality.

The new Bethany movement exists precisely to use media creatively in communal spiritual self-development—and stresses the crucial importance of media production for the spiritual direction of the future. There are important preliminaries. Psychologists are becoming more aware of the complexity of operations in the brain, and already know how little our educational methods have yet harnessed human creativity. We prove to be the victims and prisoners of our mental structures—and the problem is certainly to discover how to use the brain to transcend the brain. The two hemispheres of the brain need complementary training in spiritual direction—and it is important to remember that studies of stroke victims demonstrate clearly that many of our simplest actions are in fact immensely complex integrations of mental function. One side of us (no mere simile!) can use a tool but not describe it, the other name it but not employ it—and so on.

This bites home. Ambitious attainment is demanded of our citizens if they are to feel fulfilled. This poses a major spiritual problem from the very pages of the gospel—and a thoroughly managerial and organisational image of how Christ's Church should conduct itself is not helping to combat it. The cause may be part and parcel of using the categorising and sequential side of the personality at the expense of the meditative, timeless, relational. Education in symbols is an education in our brain's potential. So we need a plurality of models and metaphors to help people in their prayer and the perspectives of eternity. This is not only because the divine refuses to be confined by any analogue, but also because different metaphors call out connections in different parts of the brain.

Communication in the Church should be the very reverse of 'a bit of good publicity'. It is the very open-endedness of modern methods of communication which is most valuable to the Church—and spiritual experience conveys itself best when it conveys many paradoxes, even contradictions, each of which lisps some truth about the God who abides and abounds.

John of the Cross presents us with just such paradoxes, and it is wise to read him while deliberately wearing the whole personality! How can it be that he who has purged himself of desires and purified the senses of the worship of natural beauty, writes in

metaphors of such sensual power that today he would scarcely have escaped his novice-master's sending him for analysis? If the dark night purges the structures of the personality so that they are blinded with the splendour of the divine, how is it that this saint of the looming spaces of eternity regularly meditated in small sheds and alcoves—looking out for hours on the slow dance of nature? How is it that mountains and rivers are so resonantly wounded by him who has passed them by—and that the immense Lord of universes meets the dark lover in a small room atop a stair? Simply to put these questions to myself means for me that spiritual experience is to be seen as the integration of the longings and drives we have rather than simply a transcending of them.

To act as servant to this, we have the theory and practice of multimedia: the complementary use of films, videos, still images, objects, music, words and drama. Each has different strengths and weaknesses. In the hands of poet and producer, they resonate on the personal memories of their audience—building on experiences of suffering and joy to extend human experience and invite transformation by the divine. In this respect, they can be like a new spiritual exercise—as for Ignatius Loyola, a human discipline which opens out to the divine presence by discernment of what we wholly are.

The Bethany Community offer visual meditations made with the full rigour of the television broadcast in its brevity and variety. We try to dramatize, with delicacy, the experience of the saints. We compose allusive music and poetry to use the ancient symbols and phrases of faith in new contexts and with new implications. One of my colleagues told me recently how a way of the cross he presented in Lent used slide sequences to convey the journey of Christ through scenes of modern industry and political strife. Many of his congregation wept.

When media are used in this way, the peculiar and sometimes constrained circumstances in which retreatants relate to retreat-director are fundamentally altered. Hearing someone speak brings its own constraint—a proper sense of distance. An audiovisual experience on the other hand invades and speaks in a more engaging way from within one's own situation. Moreover, a retreat director who took a variety of different lines might prove confusing. Characters in a dramatized film can consistently voice the tensions and paradoxes of the spiritual tradition. Symbols can be allowed to speak for themselves. Once they are beautifully presented, there

can only be harm in explaining what should speak in its own terms.

We now regularly hold multimedia retreats—which use a medium of great power called multivision. Two aspects of multivision will illustrate how medium can become as important as message. First, multivision shows images side by side—not just serially. It can imply connotations and connections by juxtaposition of several images on the same screen—even by blendings and contrasts of colour, which with this medium (which uses a whole bank of slide-projectors) are of great clarity and beauty. Because the images blend, but do not move, they are appreciated as shapes and symbols the more entirely. Secondly, in a way difficult to describe, the separate images cease to be square or rectangular—but literally melt into one another. Consider how powerful a metaphor this can provide when objects which cannot naturally coexist in the same physical space actually grow into one another and occupy an imaginary space somewhat like the images of the Apocalypse: full of eyes and ears.

Think of Paul's much-more-than-factual description of the flesh (*sarx*). For him, it is a sort of chaos: full both of the vulnerability of the human body and of our world's corruption by evil and wrongdoing from which we are delivered by the death of Christ to dwell *en Christo*. In a visual meditation on the Letter to the Romans, the retreatant sees the harshness of textures, the chaos of strife, physically and kaleidoscopically *melt* into the contours of a modern young surfer who is seen as crucified 'on things'. Described, the metaphors will not fit. Seen, they have immediate and direct impact and excite profound emotions of sorrow and pity.

Here then is an actual instance of return to a dramatic, allusive, multi-dimensional gospel. It takes devotion and expertise to produce it. But for scattered prayer groups unable to meet great figures or encounter great inspiration, it means that the quality of modern communications can soon bring such deep experiences into their very homes. Finding what media best convey a total message, and best enhance the ancient symbols of incarnation and redemption will constitute a new iconography.

These new icons are open and wide. They do not pretend to carefully regulated meanings and connotations. They are instead an attempt to convey honestly and broadly all the instincts of humankind—and to see God as ready to shape them. Unlike the

confident Greeks of the third century, we should be wary of stretching metaphors so far that we begin to draw conclusions from them on which people may be exiled and executed.

Paul was lucky in his supine inspiration. His spontaneity and impulsiveness would scarcely have survived the knowledge that God was making use of these to reveal himself in a way more entire than the shining experience of the road. In our age, conveying the ringing implications and associations needs the new and passionate media of the new iconography. For that reason, the audiovisual approach to spirituality is not just a way of making formation in prayer more attractive. It is a return to the mind and heart of love.

We must realise that at the growing times of our faith, many different approaches have been suggested—but always with a passion and fervour suitable to evoking the deepest mysteries of the human personality as it incandesces with its God.

One can actually show by psychological examples that there are some perceptions equally valid, but which the brain cannot contain simultaneously. They must be experienced separately—allowed to play on one another like the four gospels, Paul and James. So it may be, always *is* I think, with spiritual truth. Should we for one moment see God unmediated by appearance, model, history and supposition, we would die in horror: in an explosion of ineffable combustion. The incarnation of Christ is God's assurance to us that this cannot happen, yet that we shall none the less be led through sacrament to reality by him who is our saviour and our Final One: the Image of Rising, the Glorified Way.