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**COMMUNICARE NECESSE EST**

*The Roman Catholic Church's Teachings on Communication from the  
Beginnings to the Age of Modern Technology  
(Summary)*

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*“So then faith comes by hearing, and hearing by the word of God.”*

*Romans 10:17*

*You pay debts while owing nothing; and when You forgive debts, lose nothing. Yet, O my God, my life, my holy joy, what is this that I have said? And what says any man when He speaks of You? Yet woe to those who keep silence, seeing that even they who say most are as the dumb.*

*St. Augustine*

*Truth, therefore, is not really grasped when it is imposed from without as something impersonal, but only when it flows from free relationships between persons, from listening to one another.*

*Pope Francis*

## **Communication and the Church**

When setting out to describe what the church is and contemplating its nature we may choose from among a variety of approaches. For some time now, an entire theological discipline—namely, ecclesiology—has been responsible for tackling the problem of what the church is and attempting to provide an answer that is at once holistic and rich in detail. From a survey of the various definitions (some brief, others more lengthy) we arrive at a number of important and complementary aspects aiding our work.

Our task becomes truly difficult if we set out to provide a description of the church which strikes a balance between the institutional and the theological realities. For what explanation will suffice to unite two worlds that seem to be at odds with one another: the human and the divine, the heavenly and the earthly, the ideal and the real, the intangible and the tangible? Furthermore, what definition of the church transcends time and place and holds true for all of church- and human history?

Our answer to this question is: *communication*. This is the term that, in line with the Second Vatican Council, has risen to the forefront of theological thinking, though admittedly in the different yet related form of *communio*. Although the forms differ, earlier authors and the Council itself use them as synonyms, almost interchangeably. Communication, therefore,

is an essential component of the nature of the church and has been since the church's beginnings.

In wishing to map out the most relevant meanings of the word, we must distance ourselves a bit from its everyday sense and focus our attention on certain historical-etymological considerations.

The word *communication* was coined, surprisingly enough, not in Antiquity, but during the Middle Ages, and was originally profoundly linked to ecclesiastical vocabulary. Although the word in its current form arose rather late in history, the term can be traced to the distant past: the words *munis*, *-e* and *municus*, *-a*, *-um* (the latter analogous to *civis*→*civicus*) were already known in the pre-Latin period. The root word at the heart of these expression, *munus*, *-eris* means 'task, duty, service,' therefore the adjectival form refers to one who undertakes these tasks, shoulders these burdens. With the prefix *cum*, the word comes to mean '(that which is) born together,' in other words, that which is 'general, universal, common.'

It is not hard to see, then, that *communication*, in its original sense, refers in its active form to 'participation' in something, and in its passive form to the act of 'partaking of' something. It is likely that these very nuances in meaning account for the popularity of the word *communication* over *communio* as far back as the first centuries of Christianity. Speakers of Latin then had a much more dynamic sense of the nuances in the word's meaning and, edifyingly for us, came rather quickly to prefer it over its sister word.

A similar line of thought may be observed in the Holy Scriptures, more specifically in the Vulgate. The translator uses both Latin words, *communio* and *communicatio* to render the Greek term *koinonia*, the meaning of which essentially matches that of the Latin term *communis*: 'shared ownership of something,' or 'partaking of something.' Although the term *koinonia* has a secondary, negative meaning of 'common' (i.e. vulgar, unrefined), what is more important for our purposes is that in other contexts, it is defined as 'participation' or a 'companion.' While the Holy Scriptures never define the church itself using the word *communio*, they do refer to the role of the church in revealing the *communio* among the persons of the Holy Trinity. It is also manifestly evident that the Bible considers human beings as fundamentally defined by their relationships to other human beings, in whom they contemplate the image of God, thereby engaging in dialogue with God Himself.

When examining linguistic data from non-Biblical Greek, we are led to similar conclusions about human nature. In his *Gorgias*, Plato uses *koinonia* to refer to relations among the gods, while one of Aristotle's definitions of the human being is *zoon koinonikon*, thereby emphasizing that nature has created man for communal existence.

Building on all of the above, we can better understand St. Thomas Aquinas, one of the greatest synthesizers of Christian theology, in his full-fledged and emphatic use of the term *communication*, evident not only in the frequent occurrence of the word in his writings but also in that it is used interchangeably with *communion* and *communitas*. In my dissertation, I seek to explicate a teaching of the Christian faith and theology that is part of a tradition simultaneously ancient and unbroken and in constant need of renewal. I attempt a thorough-going examination of the multi-faceted link between the church and communication in its various forms and expressions over time. My theses, which will be considered in theory and illustrated with practical examines, are the following:

1. Media is becoming ever more ritualized, that is, it is taking up functions that originally characterized religion.
2. Religion itself is becoming increasingly media-like and popularized, in other words, it is increasingly and ever more self-consciously making use of the whole arsenal of social communication methods.
3. This mutual interaction began with the founding of the church and continues to this day.
4. The reasons for all of the above may be found in the fundamental nature of the church, which is *communio*.

### **The Parts of the Dissertation**

Following the introduction, six chapters of the dissertation are devoted to a detailed examination of the topic of the church and communication from generic, historical, and theological aspects. The first three chapters comprise an exploration of noteworthy additions to the topic from the Early Christian period to our present day, treating separately the basic linguistic versions of the act of communication: in its heavenly/transcendental and earthly sense, and in its indirect form in the arts. Following these discussions, the study goes on to focus on one particular genre of communication easily pinned down in space and time, namely, on religious debate in Reformation Hungary and its multimedia nature. The last two chapters seek to provide an overview of church teachings related to communication, first in the light of documents created during Vatican II and in the decades following the council, secondly based on a papal messages penned by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis for World Communications Day over approximately the past decade.

When hearing the word communication, it is natural to think first of dialogue between two human beings. We must not forget, however, that there exists a fundamentally different form of communication that can be termed sacred and which is of supreme importance to the church. The practical realization of this communication is none other than the liturgy. The liturgy mediates the adoration and worship of the community of believers towards God, yet it is also through the liturgy that God responds to the fundamental questions and petitions that the faithful direct at Him. Any attempt to map the church's relation to communication must begin with a detailed examination of the emergence and development of this special form of communication within the life of the church, for it is primarily the liturgy that lies at the heart of all the other forms of communication that—with the passing of time—have gained in importance in the eyes of God's people. As regards communication with the Divine, the question of permanence and change—and the interrelation of the two—has always been fundamental. In our own day we can witness how certain groups within the church debate core theological points under the guise of the considering the vices and virtues of the *vetus* and *novus ordo* mass. Therefore it becomes clear that when examining the communicational aspects of the liturgy, we are able to penetrate more deeply into issues at the heart of the church than we would if we were merely dealing with questions of form. Our approach towards and dialogue with the Divine can shape, even define, our view of the faith, of church dogma, and of the ecclesial mode of being.

Another important aspect of communication in the faith is revealed when we examine practical questions of how church teachings are defined and passed on. The most ancient—and for a long time sole—form of catechesis was the sermon, and therefore this particular genre deserves special attention. The methods and approaches to the way we speak about the faith are heavily defined by the age in which we live, for the communication of the church is inextricably intertwined with the social and cultural environment in which it must exist and effect change. A sermon points beyond itself for, however brief or insignificant it may seem, it is a non-negligible part of our attempt to share with the community (in other words, to communicate) our current knowledge of God. The sermon may be considered a prism of the faith: it refracts, or divides into parts, an infinitely complex phenomenon and makes it visible, or perceptible, to finite human beings. It goes without saying that never over the course of history has this been easy or perfectly effective. Amidst difficulties, however, there arise opportunities for variety and adaptability. An exploration of the laws of communication defining sermons sheds light on anthropological and sociological experiences that bring us closer to an understanding of the true nature of the church and can help uncover the nature

and the rules of the flexibility which has allowed the church to transmit its teachings in formally novel, modern ways.

It is not merely through the word, whether human or divine, that Christian teaching remains at the heart of human intellectual life, for it is not only the Word that can be holy, but *ars*, or art, as well. Every epoch of church history is replete with examples of joyous and successful use of art to fulfill the divine obligation of the church. What can art add to the conversation about faith, and to the knowledge of God lying at the heart of this conversation? The importance of art may be grasped at the experiential level, in the emotional and aesthetic gratification without which human life cannot be termed complete. In our broken world, there is a growing hunger for impulses that can clothe the invisible in the garment of the senses, allowing the soul to encounter the numinous. The interactive nature of the interpretation and appreciation of a work of art provides an excellent opportunity for the church to spread its message: the need for interpretation initiates thought processes which direct our attention towards the fundamental questions of life. Just as the sermon is the supreme device for the passing on of faith in a verbal context, art—with its flexibility and sensitivity to context—offers the same in a world that is becoming image-centered, a fact which we ignore at our peril during any attempt to assize the opportunities and challenges the future holds.

The most intense form of communication is perhaps the religious polemic, which—by pointing beyond the confines of our worldly life—sets the stakes as high as they can go. Religious polemic places our knowledge of God on the scale and has the power to shape our eternal life and salvation. There is yet another reason that this particular genre holds a special place among the modes of communication used by the Church: certain characteristics of the sermon, namely its multimedia and hypertextual nature, link it to the digital world of the twenty-first century. An important question regarding religious polemic—the answer to which varies from age to age, and depends on reigning trends of thought and popular consensus—is whether this radical genre of communication with ramifications both in the personal and the social sphere may be considered a form of true dialogue or whether it is instead a mode of talking past each, an instrument for the intellectual and moral elimination of the opponent. What can be safely stated is that mechanism of polemic shows multiple similarities to the current phenomenon of reality television, which makes it possible to interpret the two in relation to one another and to decide the question of the nature and efficacy of religious debate with recourse to this related genre. The creation of virtual worlds is not only possibly with the help of our modern technologies. We have been creating virtual worlds, at least in the purely mental sphere, from the very beginning of human history, and religious polemic—self-

generating and bountiful—is one of the most striking devices for the building up of this virtual universe.

The church recognized the possibilities inherent in modern communication technologies relatively early on, yet this very recognition has demanded of the church a commitment to continuous learning. Important milestones in this learning process have been the Vatican documents concerning social communication. In chapter six of this dissertation, I examine the most significant such documents in chronological order, bookended by the 1963 decree of the Second Vatican Council titled *Inter mirifica* and Pope John Paul II's 2005 apostolic letter *The rapid development*. The writings in question witness to the long way we have come from judgment and condemnation fueled by fear, through a neutral position on communication technology to the conclusion that it can be a decidedly positive tool in the hands of the church. Many things have changed radically over the past slightly more than forty years, including the way the church thinks about itself, its place in the world, and its role in society. These documents have much to say to a reader seeking to understand these changes. At the same time, the documents “speak eloquently” of the very topics they avoid: it is the very absence of discussions of language, visual culture, and the interconnected societies that speaks volumes. One thing for sure, although my above discussion of the church's process of adaptation to new communication technologies may have implied that the process is complete and we have reached our goal, the reality is that this learning process can never truly end and the church must continually adapt itself to changing circumstances.

Finally, in chapter seven I examine a special group of Vatican directives on communication which seem to carry more personal content on the part of the popes. I am referring to messages composed for World Communications Day, the first of which was penned by Paul VI and appeared as early as 1967. It has proven to be unnecessary to examine each of these messages in complete detail, seeing as they are deeply connected at a thematic level to the documents analyzed in the previous chapter. The messages composed by Pope Benedict XVI and Pope Francis comprise a far greater number of novel and highly current thoughts, and for this reason, the chapter deals with these more recent writings in greater detail. When read in chronological order, these documents paint a picture of the Church's communicational journey from the agora to the digital continent. And we can rest assured that the journey is not over yet, as shown by Pope Francis' almost surprising sensitivity to the issue in his pontificate thus far. In his latest message for World Communications Day 2018, Pope Francis addressed a topic that poses the greatest challenge to leading communications

technology experts and thinkers today, namely, how to discern between true and false in the unbounded and for the most part unchecked empire of information that is the Internet.

### **Three Mottos**

While examining the common history of communication and the church, I sought to keep three points of view in mind, summed up by the three quotations I chose as mottos of my dissertation.

The excerpt from the Epistle of St. Paul to the Romans is a concise and staunch testament to the communal nature of faith in Christ, both in the horizontal and in the vertical sense. For if faith comes by hearing, then the tradition is passed on unceasingly from generation to generation, from the Age of the Apostles to the time of the Second Coming. Furthermore, the statement holds true not only in a grand, historical context, but also at the level of our personal lives. It is by hearing that we come to faith, and it is also by word of mouth that we pass on the faith to those living around us. These words of St. Paul's may be the first sign drawing our attention to the fact that the Christian faith and the Christian community is a medium of communication. If the church ceased to be that, if it no longer practiced the art of communication, it would give up its reason for being and lose its very essence.

The words of St. Augustine add the dimension of human imperfection to this call to the great and eternal task of proclaiming the Gospel, of upholding and passing on the faith. His cry, resounding from the depths of the heart, is at once sad and hopeful, for besides pointing out to us our own weakness, it also reminds us that nothing is impossible with God, who in his grace can empower even the most sinful soul possessed of the least number of talents to become his true servant. St. Augustine's words remind us to never cease talking about God, to speak of him even when we feel we are not in possession of all the mental and spiritual gifts we would need. "What is impossible with man is possible with God" (Luke 18:27) says Jesus, and it is in this spirit that we must work to further His Kingdom.

Pope Francis' timely words provide the third motto. In our day, as we survey the growing sphere of communication and the proliferation of media content, we arrive at the conclusion that instead of serving the cause of the truth, communications and media often obscure or silence it. Unfortunately, this is true not only in the secular context but also in communication about matters of faith. The Holy Father reminds us that true communication—or *communio*—is never born of aggression or suppression, but only of mutual respect and the



willingness to listen to the other person. “By this everyone will know that you are my disciples, if you love one another” (Jn13:35) says Jesus in the Gospel. And his words ring true to this day: the basis of pure, genuine, and ethical communication can never be anything but love, and God is love.