

The Communications and Theology Project (CTP)

Since the Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Communications (CICS) at the Pontifical Gregorian University (PUG), Rome, has been offering an interdisciplinary communications studies programme for the last 27 years, some professors at the CICS with a team of international theologians and communicators have been trying to develop links with the discipline of theology and communications. The seven very enriching Cavalletti (outskirts of Rome) conferences from 1981 have got some theology professors thinking on the interplay between theology and communications. Subsequent conferences in different parts of the world too have spurred the publication of a number of books that throw ample light on the various relations between theology and communication.

The IX Theology and Communication Conference brought together 27 people, most of them university professors. The largest number of participants came from Rome; others came from Chile, Philippines, England, Hungary, Austria, United States, India, Nigeria and Tanzania. Nine of the group were theologians and eighteen were communicators, although many of them have also studied theology.

The three major themes for this meeting at Ariccia approached the relationship between theology and communication in similar ways to what we have seen of the Cavalletti conferences. The first, *Communication Inside, Communication Outside - from the Centre to Periphery*, took up the twin themes of ecclesiology and evangelization: communication *ad intra* or within the Church and communication *ad extra* or outside the Church. In today's contexts, communication media and technologies heavily influence both of these movements. One could debate (and we should) whether these media serve this dual mission well or whether interpersonal communication would better serve the basic functions of organizational communication and evangelization.

The second conference theme, *Theology and Communications*, described the whole purpose of the Cavalletti meetings. It also introduced the work of theologians who have incorporated the fruits of communication research into their work and those communication scholars who examine theology or the religious uses of communication media. Without going too much into the topic here, we can observe that these approaches carried the very real risks of people outside their areas of expertise making claims that more serious research does not support. Sadly, much wishful thinking characterizes work on both sides of the theology and communication divide. The Cavalletti approach attempted to minimize these difficulties through academic dialogue and partnership.

Finally, the third conference theme, *Communication in Formation*, returned to one of the initial motivations for the Cavalletti conferences: How should the Church prepare future ministers in terms of communication in the contemporary world? Clearly, communication forms a central part of any ministry in the Church. What roles should rhetoric, interpersonal communication, and media studies play in the formation of clergy and other ministers? Vatican II and the Pontifical Council for Social Communication asked for serious study of the issue, as have the Vatican Congregation for Seminaries and various national conferences of bishops. The Cavalletti approach consisted of preparing materials—books on fundamental theology, ecclesiology, moral theology, and so on—which could inform seminary classes without adding other courses to an already crowded set of requirements.

Summary of the conclusions

Theology and communication are distinct disciplines, each with its own methodology that must be respected. Inviting experts from the two disciplines to come together for five days of rich conversation highlighted several significant *points of intersection* between them. Theology has something to say about communication, just as communication has something to say about theology. More than that, there are elements of communication within theology, and communication can do a theological reflection on some of its own phenomenon.

1. There was serious debate over where one should ground communication in systematic theology. Some said that the intercommunion within the Trinity was the source and model of human communication; others held that one should start with the Spirit leading people to the Son who communicates the Father. The basic question is whether human communication is an echo/reflection of Trinitarian communication or whether it is something distinct whose autonomy should be respected.

There was a strong agreement about the importance of doing a contextual theology rather than an abstract, universalized one that ignores culture. The cultural context in which one theologizes is a point of intersection between theology and communication since the latter both expresses and creates cultures.

2. We discussed ecclesiology a great deal, especially the place of the Church in a post-Modern world that is quickly being reshaped by the new digital media in which technology is affecting how people relate to each other and how they think. The Church faces a choice of remaining within its comfort zone of long-developed ways of communicating with established groups or of entering the broader cultural discourse, which means engaging a media culture, as John Paul II did. We cannot conceptualize a dichotomy of “us” within the Church and “them” outside, the new digital barbarians; even active Church members are being influenced by popular culture. The Church needs a significant re-orientation to address its own members adequately as well as to engage in dialogue with the broader culture. The Church needs to be willing to “translate” its message into terms that resonate with people formed by the new popular culture.

The political question of communication within the Church was another area of discussion. The question is, “Who controls communication? Who are the gatekeepers?” In past times control resided in Church leadership, but the new technologies have opened other possibilities for much wider participation. The contribution of lay Catholic communication experts will be very important, provided that Church leaders invite them to contribute.

3. Within the discipline of communication, the conversation stressed the importance of looking at communication as a broad, multi-dimensional phenomenon that includes interpersonal communication, cultural analysis, preaching, story-telling, music and oral presentations, not just technology. The earlier “instrumental” approach—simply using technology unreflectively as tools—was soundly rejected; the Church has tended to follow this approach, which minimizes the importance of communication.

4. Communication’s main point of intersection with theology comes in the area of pastoral theology. Cinema and media literacy courses have long been used in training people for

ministry. Now we highlighted the need for a communication sensitivity and competency that includes critical self-reflection, an imaginative appreciation of culture, an appreciation of cultural richness in diverse groups, and an ability to integrate one's own story into the larger context.

Communication experts can learn from theology and apply a type of theological reflection about communication phenomena. Some professors have already developed methods of using theological models to organize the program of communication studies. There is a great need to analyze the theoretical implications and cultural consequences of new forms of communication, the new digital media. A broad historical perspective is important since previous stages of communication (orality and literacy) do not disappear, but coincide with and overlap the new modes of communication. The group raised more questions than it could answer about the impact new media developments will have on faith and culture. The revolutionary change that one can see in young students points to a huge impact that needs to be understood so that the Church can adequately respond in an effective pastoral manner.

5. A significant challenge to greater collaboration between the two disciplines comes from the fact that in many seminaries and institutions preparing people for ministry, pastoral theology itself is not given sufficient attention. Homiletics courses may not be offered, or might just focus on content, but not on an awareness of what the Word of God has to say to a specific people in a specific cultural context or on the homilist as communicator (in terms of self-awareness, oral quality, believability, etc). If the seminary does not even take homiletic training seriously, then it probably will not care about developing a communication competency in its students in other areas.

6. Participants saw a great benefit from the interactive method of this conference, which stands apart from the typical academic conference in which only a few experts give presentations. Everyone at Ariccia presented a paper which was discussed in greater detail in small group sessions and then in summary form with the whole group. The discussion between academicians coming from the two diverse disciplines was very lively and insightful. Some practical results are the decision to publish the papers of the conference and to create a "reader" that collects key articles that will help people, especially those preparing people for ministry, to understand the intersection of these two disciplines.

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