

THE WORD THAT GOES FORTH

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Introduction

The purpose of the summer school on media and the Churches was educational. It was meant to be an opportunity for broadcasters, journalists, Church spokespersons and the general public to come to a better understanding of how media report Church news and of what the Church has to do in order to proclaim its message more effectively.

The initiative for the conference was taken by a Church body. It is therefore appropriate that we conclude the publication of these papers with a reflection on the responsibilities of the Church in a world in which media play a critical role.

What no eye has seen, nor ear heard

That which 'no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived',¹ is revealed in and to the Christian community. Viewed from the perspective of the community's faith, we have a gifted insight into the dignity of all creation. We have an 'exclusive', an 'inside' story to tell. God's most complete and graphic rendition of God's own story lives on in us as a community. In the story of Jesus, God 'tells all'. Times past, there was an economy with the facts, partial glimpses, hints of where the truth might lie, games of hide-and-seek. When Moses, for example, interviews God about his future

plans for the chosen race he doesn't know what to make of the deliberately evasive answer, 'I am who I am', and scholars are unsure to this day just how to translate it.² With Jesus, however, God holds nothing back: 'In him we see our God made visible, and so are caught up in love of the God we cannot see.'³ In Jesus two stories, God's and ours, become one. God's story is the beginning and end of ours, and as the plenitude of God is made known to us, human dignity and depth is also unfolded before us.

What is disclosed is not marked for our eyes only. The Good News is for all, and for this very reason must be proclaimed. It must be proclaimed so that by hearing it, all people may grow in hope and in love.⁴ Right at the heart of our celebration of the Eucharist we proclaim bread broken and shared and a cup poured out, *for all*, in Jesus' memory. To reach all people with this insight, and primarily for this reason, the Church must relate to the media fully, wisely and responsibly.

Differing anthropologies

But there is a problem. As institutions, media and Church march to different drums. This becomes quite apparent when one reflects, for example, on the treatment of people who have, by any standard, committed acts which can only be considered reckless, corrupt, perverted or depraved. The media, perhaps reflecting the personal stances of many readers and viewers, pass ready judgement on people's lives. Words like 'disgraced' or 'shamed' or 'crooked' almost replace people's Christian names. The message is: these people are beyond redemption.

The Church, on the other hand, if it is faithful to its mission, reserves judgement. And this is why, for example, priests and religious can and must stand beside the graves of

people who may have done outrageous things, even if to some this is a source of hurt or of scandal. Newspapers and television intersect with people's lives only for a few brief moments to record events of great triumph or disaster. But the Church does not settle for the edited highlights. It stays with a person's life story, stretching it, expanding it with the story of the Gospel.⁵ The Christian community moves easily from the lonely, craggy hilltop of Calvary, with its stench of betrayal and decay, to that place where, even while still dark, joy fills the emptiness of the tomb. Words of compassion, of forgiveness, of promise and hope are not difficult to find for those who are living and dying with the Lord.⁶ There is nothing in human experience which is not only accounted for, but interpreted beyond words in the story of Jesus of Nazareth. And so in the face of apparent no-win situations the Church holds before all people the possibility of forgiveness and the power of love. Whatever its reputation for preaching the loss of heaven and the pains of hell, the Church has always taught that the final chapter in someone's life is never written until they die, and even in death it remains hidden from us. All we know with certainty is that because God is co-author of our lives, no one is beyond redemption or conversion. The rest is a mystery; disturbing at times, but still a mystery.

Truth and freedom

The essential difference between media and Church becomes clear when we examine two concepts fundamental to both institutions: truth and freedom. It is the responsibility of newspapers and television to tell the truth, 'to tell it as it is'. Truth is generally understood as information or facts which, it is perceived, the public has a right to know. Thus, the truth is 'revealed' and people or institutions are 'exposed'.

The truth of a person or a situation, according to Christian anthropology, is not reducible to information or facts, however accurate. When we look at the Gospels we see that truth is an encounter and an invitation to conversion. Jesus confronted people with the truth of his ministry every day. We need only recall the stories of Zacchaeus, the ostracised tax-collector; the Samaritan woman at the well who had five husbands and no husband; or Jesus' encounter with Pilate, who was determined to maintain the *Pax Romana* at any cost.⁷ Encounters with the truth were sometimes painful. But when people were 'exposed', it was not just to their wrongdoing, but also to their dignity and worth before God. People were not left condemned and helpless by the revelation of their falsity. Their exposure was in the very same moment an experience of love and an invitation to conversion. People saw themselves as God saw them. This opened up possibilities and choices. Not everyone accepted the truth: Zacchaeus did, and he was liberated from his greed; the woman at the well went away with more questions than answers; Pilate washed his hands. Those who accepted the truth were freed, those who rejected it were condemned. They were not condemned by Jesus, who still loved them, perhaps loved them even more. They were condemned by themselves because now they knew who they were before God and, refusing to accept it, were living a contradiction.

'The truth will make you free'; we read in John's Gospel.⁸ Contrary to the word on the street, the Church is very much in favour of freedom. But by freedom the Christian community does not mean the absence of any restriction, the freedom to do one thing today and something else tomorrow. This is not human freedom and does not bring genuine happiness or fulfilment. Human freedom, as the

Church understands it, is the capacity to fulfil our potential as human beings. When Jesus spoke of freedom it was usually in the context of freedom from sin or disease.⁹ Both sin and disease prevent people from living fully human lives. Sin is deliberately missing the mark in terms of living in a wholly human way. Our lives have potential and each of our free decisions is a step towards or away from achieving it. We are free when we take decisions which advance us along the path towards fulfilment. Contrary decisions enslave us and draw our whole lives into contradiction.

In a society which is pluralist and liberal, there will be conflicting notions of truth and freedom. And in a democratic society all opinions carry equal rights. The media, if they are to be fair and balanced, must treat each opinion with the same respect. Christianity, however, does not see its understanding of truth and freedom as simply one among others. It believes that in Jesus Christ, truth and freedom find an absolute reference point in human history, and one which is accessed in the Christian community. This places Christianity on a collision course with those who see truth and freedom merely in relative terms, as matters of public opinion which can vary according to circumstance, time and place. It is important, then, for both Church and media authorities to be realistic about the extent to which media at the service of a pluralist and liberal society can respect the Christian community's understanding of truth and freedom.

Does this mean that people who do not believe in Jesus Christ cannot be at the service of truth and freedom? Earlier in these papers, the editor of *The Sunday Tribune*, Matt Cooper, quoted Archbishop Desmond Connell as saying that:

it is not surprising that there should be a close correspondence between the law of the land and Catholic moral teaching in respect of a host of crimes from tax evasion to rape. Such crimes are forbidden by the law, not because Catholic teaching rejects them but because they injure the common good. It is clear that no vision of the common good is possible if it is not a moral vision as well.

Matt Cooper goes on to ask: 'Is he [Dr Connell] suggesting that somehow non-Catholics in the legislature and the media do not have moral values which inform their views on issues like tax evasion and rape?'¹⁰ Obviously, Matt Cooper has misunderstood the archbishop. There cannot be anything at the core of authentic Catholic moral teaching which does not at the same time accord with the deepest resonances of the human heart, and therefore with what serves the common good of all people. Anyone who seeks the common good is seeking the same things as Christians who see in Jesus the ultimate standard of truth and freedom, and, who is, for them, 'the way, truth and life'.¹¹

Points of intersection

There is much reporting in newspapers and television which appeals to very basic instincts in us. We might not be very proud of the fact but we do take some pleasure in learning the often sordid details of other people's lives, their love affairs, their business scams. We like to see important people being taken down a peg or two. We have to take responsibility for the fact that this kind of journalism survives. In real terms, however, this kind of journalism makes money, but little impact.

There is another kind of journalism. It is the kind that somehow manages to reflect what Brendan Kennelly calls 'life's transcendent dignity'. As an example I have in mind Fergal Keane's letter to his newly-born son Daniel.¹² We can picture Keane, sitting at his typewriter, quietly picking out the keys with one hand as Daniel rests secure in his arms. As he looks at this sleeping child he is filled with a sense of the majesty of life, but also of its fragility. He has never felt more alive and more potent than he does at this moment. At the same time he recognises how much of what he valued in life until now – prizes, tributes, glory – have no meaning whatsoever. Staring into the face of this new life he dies to these. He recalls the faces of other children whose brief lives briefly intersected with his in places like Angola, Afghanistan and Rwanda. Significantly he recalls them by name. They are dead, victims largely of human neglect. These memories fill him with a great sense of protectiveness towards Daniel. Then he recalls his own birth and the story of love and love gone wrong in the life of his own alcoholic father. This is now part of Daniel's story too. He hoped that his father 'could hear, across the infinity between the living and the dead, your proud statement of arrival. For if he could hear, he would recognise the distinct voice of family, the sound of hope and new beginnings that you and all your innocence and freshness have brought to the world'.¹³

Keane evokes in us a sense of the wonder of parenthood and the giftedness of life. At the same time we experience shame at our own negligence in the face of massive suffering and need, and a sense of loss as we recall relationships in our own lives which, for one reason or another, fell apart. Significantly, Keane's collection of articles is subtitled *Despatches from the Heart*. Heidegger drew our attention to

the fact that recording something is first and foremost an activity of the heart, *cor, cordis*. In the best of journalism heart speaks to heart. We are moved. We are affected. We are not just in-formed, we are trans-formed.

The birth of Fergal Keane's son was a small event in itself, of little newsworthiness outside his family circle. But the significance of an event is not determined by how many columns it rates in a newspaper. Kavanagh highlights this in his poem, 'Epic'. He observes two farmers, stripped to the waist, armed with pitchforks and ready to kill each other over a half-rood of land. An unimportant episode in itself when compared with the grey clouds of war gathering over mainland Europe at that very moment. He writes:

I inclined
To lose my faith in Ballyrush and Gortin
Till Homer's ghost came whispering to my mind
He said: I made the Iliad from such
A local row. Gods make their own importance.¹⁴

'Gods make their own importance'. Good journalism unearths the spark of divinity hidden in even the most ordinary story of human turmoil or triumph. This kind of journalism challenges Christianity. Christian faith must interpret the complexity of human experience. It must address the plenitude of our humanity, the joyful and sorrowful mysteries, as they are recorded by poets, artists and the media. When journalism reveals, for example, genuine injustice and exploitation, it is a challenge to the Christian community to preach justice and practise what it preaches. When it records profound human suffering, it is a cry to show how such suffering somehow speaks to us of the mystery of God.

It is only being realistic to acknowledge that today media set the agenda for Christianity. If we do not address the issues which they raise, we force Christians to live in two worlds which seem to have little in common with one another. Ultimately we risk the marginalisation of Christian faith.

At the same time, if we accept the Christian perspective, we have to admit that only God has all the facts regarding events affecting his creatures, and so only God can write the *definitive* record.

A treasure, but in clay jars

In the last few years the media have rightly examined the conscience of the Church. They have pointed to our hypocrisy and double standards. They have shown how we have not fully believed or practised what we have professed. They have highlighted how, individually, and at times as a community, we have behaved shamefully and irresponsibly.

A self-examination might reveal sins of omission which have escaped media attention but which may well be at the root of the more publicised failures. For example: the failure to develop and sustain a form of ministry which is life-giving for all in the Church, including ministers themselves; a half-hearted approach to liturgical renewal; the failure to educate people into an adult faith, often leaving them with childish and destructive notions of God which have needlessly filled them with fear and guilt; a failure to preach the demands of justice.

That the treasure we hold, to use Paul's phrase,¹⁵ we hold in clay jars, is something we should have known only too well. It is something which has always been known to God. Sin and failure lie at the heart of the human story which God has taken to himself in the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. They lie at

the heart of the story, but not at its end. The end is resurrection and new life.

The challenge now is: how do we learn from our weakness and failure? We begin by acknowledging fully to ourselves and to those who have been offended by the Church that wrong has been done, whether by individuals, or by those in authority. We must do everything to repair the damage not only as the law requires but as justice and love demand.

As a community we must then seek and celebrate forgiveness and healing. Forgiveness, as John Shea writes, is 'not magnanimously forgetting faults, but the uncovering of self-worth when it is crusted over with self-hatred'.¹⁶ We know we have accepted forgiveness when we have a restored sense of our own dignity and a renewed confidence in ourselves because of God's confidence in us.

The failures of the Christian community cannot be allowed to hold it back from proclaiming the Good News. Nor can they simply be left behind or ignored. If responded to prayerfully and practically, however, they will result in a greater trust in the power of the crucified God at work even in human weakness.

We begin to communicate by listening

There are some practical steps which the Church here in Ireland needs to take if it is to communicate the Gospel effectively at the turn of this century.

Some are of the opinion now that the Irish Church has missed the boat with regard to pastoral renewal. What is now needed is a plan for basic evangelisation.¹⁷ The first step in evangelisation, i.e. in proclaiming the Good News, is listening. This is acknowledged in *Evangelii nuntiandi* of Paul VI. It is also reflected in the very first words of Vatican II's

decree on Divine Revelation: '*Hearing* the Word of God, with reverence'. This listening is *prior* to 'proclaiming it with faith'.¹⁸

What we listen to is the Word of God. It is the Word of God which lives in the scripture and tradition of the Christian community. But it is also the Word of God as it takes flesh in people's daily lives. This is how the Word of God remains alive, fresh and youthful. If we fail to listen to one or other presence of God's Word, we will not understand it at all. Nor will we move beyond words into action.

Listening is first and foremost an inner disposition. It demands humility – it means we have something to learn. It also requires a level of trust in ourselves and in those to whom we are listening. Listening also involves risk: we may well be changed by what we hear. But if we are afraid to take the risk of listening, then our faith is weak. The parable of the talents makes clear that fear is the opposite of faith. The man with the one talent is punished; he buried it in the ground 'because he was afraid'.¹⁹ The others are rewarded not because they were successful, but because they took risks. Risk-taking is part and parcel of discipleship. Playing safe is not. People listen to what the media have to say. It is important that we listen as well. The media can help us to discern 'the joys and hopes, the anguish and sadness of our day'.²⁰

Media education

In the past, the Church invested heavily in education. We still consider it important to be involved and influential in the running and management of schools. But young people today are more likely to be influenced by what they are taught through television and newspapers than in school.²¹ We need to take account of this.

How do we convince people to live according to Christian values today? We will not do this by frightening them as perhaps we did in the past.²² Nor will we be able to limit choices regarding belief and behaviour. The Internet and, soon, digital television mean that even the state is unable to control what people see or read, even if it so wished. The main contribution the Church can make at this moment, therefore, is to educate people in how to make responsible choices. We need to concentrate on helping people to be free and mature enough in themselves that they can choose that which most accords with human dignity and well-being.

Specifically with regard to the media, the credibility of the Christian community depends on educated and articulate lay people confidently discussing matters of faith on the airwaves and in the newspaper columns. Again, Church leaders need to learn to trust lay people. They also have to accept that ageing black and white clerics, before they open their mouths at all, are likely to send many people reaching for the remote control.

Christian media

There is room for specifically Church-based media which provide forums for discussion of and education in issues primarily of interest to the Christian community. One of the great failures of the post-Vatican II Church is adult religious education. This could still be made good with effective use of modern means of communication. At the same time these media should not be inward-looking or incestuous, ecclesiastical equivalents of *Pravda*. Instead, they should create a genuine conversation between Christian faith and the issues and events which affect people's daily lives.

To make an important theological point: Church-based

media could play an important role both in the reception and development of Church teaching. How much of Vatican II's teaching has actually been received? How many people know more than the externals? No matter how many catechisms have been sold, people still need a forum in which to question and learn so that they might understand and believe.

Church-based media can also fulfil an important function with regard to the development of doctrine. This will be possible, however, only if conflicting views are allowed to be heard, and if the risk is taken of saying or believing the wrong thing. Open, frank and intelligent discussion has never damaged the faith, and attempts to stifle discussion usually do not work anyway. Disagreement and even dissent can play important roles in the life of the Church. Criticism needs to be given voice, and the key question is not if it is 'loyal' but whether or not it is justified. The wheat will always eventually be separated from the darnel. And the best way to prevent people from mistaking one for the other is by educating them.

There is a danger that Church-sponsored media might fall into the hands of fundamentalists. Fundamentalism is even more dangerous to faith than relativism or pluralism because it wears the apparel of orthodoxy. It provides quick-fix answers which temporarily assuage the pain of questioning but ultimately leaves faith hungry and undernourished. As Newman said, 'mere inherited faith, in those who can have an intelligent faith, is, to say the least, dangerous and inconsistent'.²³

At the same time, specifically Church-based media should not take the place of a Christian presence in the public media. There are many people who would never buy a Church-sponsored newspaper or tune in to a religious broadcasting station. In any case, it is important that journalists and

broadcasters, specifically motivated by their faith, can become accepted and respected among their peers, where exacting professional standards apply.

Conclusion

As we end one millennium and begin another, the Church in many ways has come of age. The media have played an important if not always welcome role in this maturation process. In an adult Church (and adult society) the only kind of authority which can be exercised with any degree of effectiveness is the authority of the truth. It was the only kind of authority which Jesus Christ claimed.

The Church now faces two challenges: to present the message of the Gospel in such a way that its promise of fulfilment is self-evident, and to educate people so that they can discern the truth in freedom. Both of these can only be accomplished by a vibrant and confident faith-community. The restoration of our confidence is dependent upon our trusting fully in the One who said:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the
earth, making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.²⁴

Notes

1. 1 Cor 2:9.
2. Ex 3:14.

3. *Preface of Christmas 1.*
4. Cf. *Dei verbum*, Prologue.
5. 'The story of Jesus ... is the human story in its full extent, from God to God, expanding our story that is only from womb to tomb.... This story does not happen in a privileged world in which it slips from earth to heaven as in a suction tube. It intersects with our story in all the latter's inconclusiveness and bitterness and expands it to its deific statute' (Sebastian Moore, 'Four steps towards making sense of theology', *The Downside Review*, 3, 1993, pp. 81, 82).
6. 'We do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord; so then, whether we live or whether we die, we are the Lord's. For to this end Christ died and lived again, so that he might be Lord of both the dead and the living' (Rm 14:7-9).
7. Cf. Lk 19:1-10; Jn 4:10-30; Jn 18:33-38.
8. Jn 8:32.
9. Cf., for example, Lk 13:12.
10. 'Religion and Media: A National Editor's Outlook', in this volume, p. 40ff.
11. Jn 14:6.
12. Fergal Keane, *Letter to Daniel – Despatches from the Heart*, London: Penguin, 1996, pp. 35-39.
13. *Letter to Daniel*, p. 38.
14. Patrick Kavanagh, *The Complete Poems*, Newbridge: Goldsmith Press, 1972, p. 238.
15. 2 Cor 7.
16. John Shea, *The Challenge of Jesus*, Texas: Thomas More Publishing, 1996, p. 128.
17. This view was expressed at a meeting of diocesan

representatives with the Bishops' National Millennium Planning Committee in December 1996.

18. 'Hearing the Word of God with reverence and proclaiming it with faith, the sacred Synod takes its direction from these words of St John: "We announce to you the eternal life which dwelt with the Father and was made visible to us. What we have seen and heard we announce to you, so that you may have fellowship with us and our common fellowship be with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ" (1 Jn 1:2-3). Therefore, following in the footsteps of the Council of Trent and of the First Vatican Council, the present Council wishes to set forth authentic doctrine on divine revelation and how it is handed on, so that by hearing the message of salvation the whole world may believe, by believing it may hope, and by hoping it may love' (*Dei verbum*, Prologue).
19. Mt 25:14-30.
20. John Paul II, *Redemptor hominis*.
21. 'The moral life of a community is determined, in part, by the images available to it for the formation of the imagination by which it lives. Artists and what we now call "the media" are primary providers of those images in the contemporary world.... Since the electronic "media" are a new and powerful technology without precedent in human experience, there is no body of traditional wisdom by which we can understand and assess their effects on the formation of people, communities, democracies – or a global commons'. Laurent A. Parks *et al.*, *Common fire – lives of commitment in a complex world*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1996, pp. 229, 231.

22. It is extraordinary to think that people were encouraged to behave morally out of fear when one recalls the statement by St Thomas Aquinas, 'He therefore who avoids evil not because it is evil but because of the command of God is not free, but he who avoids evil because it is evil is free' (Commentary on 2 Cor 3, quoted in Vincent McNamara, *The Truth in Love*, Dublin: Gill & Macmillan, 1988, p. 42).
23. Quoted before the preface in Michael Paul Gallagher, *Help my unbelief*, Dublin: Veritas, 1983.
24. Is 55:10-12.