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Competence in Social Communication: A Christian Perspective

Franz-Josef Eilers, svd

The traditional concept of Media Education as promoted in several Church documents has to be revised and extended. In view of modern developments in communication technology and behavior where the roles of producer and consumer change, it has to be extended or even substituted with the concept of “Communication Competence”. Beyond an original listing by the German Bishops’ Conference Communication Commission (2011) of four competencies there are at least seven to be considered. Beside the technical, critical, creative and ethical competence, also the cultural, professional and especially the theological competence must be considered.

Already the Vatican II document on Social Communication *Inter Mirifica* refers to teaching “Media Education”. The “proper use” of Media and the related field of “Media Education” should be a program of all Catholic schools at all levels, seminaries and lay apostolate associations”. It is even proposed as part of Catechism classes (IM 16). Such education fulfills – according to *Inter Mirifica* – the “need... to use the media properly” and this is said especially in view of young people. A similar proposal was already made for film by Pope Pius XI in his Encyclical Letter on Film *Vigilanti Cura* in 1936 and was also part of Pope Pius XII’s Encyclical *Miranda Prorsus* (1957) on the electronic media (No 57 ff.). The same concern is also expressed especially in view of film education as well as in a more general way. It is repeated in the Vatican II-demanded Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* (1971, Nos. 64-70).

The purpose and content of Media Education is described as training in the “basic principles governing the working of the media in human society.” Such training should include “a practical consideration of the

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special nature of each medium, of its status in the local community and how it can be best utilized” (64). *Communio et Progressio* further refers in a special way to children and young people who should be “guarded and fostered from early age” (67). The obligation and role for media education here is given especially to teachers and educators (68). The place for such a training and education should also be “in school curricula” where it should be offered “systematically” and “at every stage of education” (69)...

In general, media education is the teaching for a critical use of the media. This requires, beside others, some knowledge about the institutional structure, working methods and means of production and the way of presentation of news and stories. Thus it was, for example, the main role of media education to help to select and present news in newspapers and news programs. Here the journalist and editor were the ones to decide on the subject, presentation and placement and even the timing for a publication. Their role was the one of a “gatekeeper” to somehow regulate the flow and presentation of news and stories through proper media channels.

This situation has radically changed today with the multiplication of TV programs and services. Now it is not any more the journalist or the editor who decides what, when, where and how something is going to be published or even consumed. It is the consumer himself who decides what, when and where s/he is watching. The role of the journalist is rather one of a ‘guide’ and guaranty for quality than a gatekeeper as the Asian Communication Bishops said in 1999 while studying the Megatrends of Asia in view of the coming of the new millennium (Eilers, 2008,43). Such developments and challenges require much more than just media education in the narrow and traditional sense: it calls for a proper communication *competence*. The concern is not in the first instance the mere critical *use* of the means of communication but rather the *competence* to decide and select on content and means themselves. News is now available 24 hours a day (24/7), anytime, anywhere and to everybody. How to select what, when, where and

which way to consume is now the decision of the consumer which makes him/her not only a consumer but ‘elevates’ him/her to a kind of producer or rather makes him/her a “Pro-Sumer” – a producer and consumer at the same time.

What kind of competence, however, is required for such a change in role? In the earlier days and also in the Church the role for proper ‘education’ was given to teachers, schools and parents. Today this is only true in a very limited way. It is actually young people themselves who learn and/or ‘teach’ the ‘proper’ use of the modern means of communication – not any more the “mass media” in the strict sense - to their parents and teachers. And even if this refers first to the technical processes they are also the ones who decide beforehand on the contents and details of their use. The so called “digital natives” (born after 1991, the naming of the World Wide Web 1991!) are teaching the “digital immigrants” (born before 1991!) how, where and for what to use or rather to live with and in the modern 24/7 communication means which are no longer limited to a single medium but to the whole spectrum of human (“social”) communication. The whole range of communication means ranging from the former ‘classical’ to the now social media and networks are part of the ‘digital natives’ daily lives, like the air they breathe. Modern Communication is not any more “means” or/ and “media” which are technically determined but it is rather social networks which are people...

What now are the qualities and abilities needed in a situation that requires a leap far beyond the traditional “Media Education”? This calls for the development and strengthening of a proper “competence” for every person. To develop proper competence, however, is first determined by the origin, family, education and faith of a person. From these “groundings” proper dispositions have to be developed in family, community, and in schools. Ways of life and proper perspectives are to be ‘implanted’ leading to proper dispositions. This is not done by teaching only but rather by the example and experience of a living communicative community, communicative persons and experiencing

Faith... It is not so much teaching but rather the living experience and example of people... This is also at the center of a proper “pastoral” approach which insists not so much on “teaching” and “pronouncing” but rather on sharing of expectations and life.

This should be reflected also in our communication “programs” in being are less media and training oriented but rather aiming at ‘formation’ to strengthen proper ‘dispositions’ in people. Such ‘dispositions’ are needed long before any “training” (skills!) takes place. We need first social communication *formation* instead of mere ‘training’ for skills. Our graduate program in Pastoral Communication at the University of Santo Tomas (UST) program in Manila is built on these principles rather than on media training in the sense of imparting skills...

Such considerations are also underlying a document of the Communication Commission of the German Bishops’ Conference from 2011 which calls for studying and applying “Communication Competence” rather than the ‘usual’ traditional training for communication. In their understanding, the role of the recipient in the past was just that of a ‘passive consumer’ which by now has changed into a *Pro-Sumer*. The recipient should be to quite an extent in charge of his/her own communicative experience instead of being ‘consumed’ by pre-programmed and often commercially determined media.

Here the *Inter Mirifica* concept of “*social communication*” gets a new meaning beyond the Council Fathers original intention 50 years ago which saw the new name more as a common expression for all media, rather than their role in society. These media were seen as “instruments” but not as much as a *process*. Social communication is actually the communication *of and in* human society far beyond single media.

Franz Cardinal Koenig (Vienna) distanced himself from this instrumentality perception already when he told the Catholic journalists at the World Congress of the Catholic Press July 1968 in Berlin to rather

look at *Lumen Gentium*, the Vatican II document on the Church and *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the modern world to see their real mission and value as Christians and Communicators and as essential part of the Church and Christian life.

What now do we now mean by “Communication Competence”? Which are the levels and dispositions to be seen and developed? The German document still confines itself to the “media culture” which has – in my understanding – to be extended to *Social Communication* as the communication *of and in* human society and as such cover all areas of pastoral ministry.

We do not limit competence to media only but should see the need for it in all communicative processes in ministry like e.g. the way I deal with people and act accordingly. ‘Competence’ is not another expression for proper handling of the media. Rather it is concerned about people to properly understand, act and ‘communicate’) in proper ways and means. This refers to interpersonal communication, intercultural communication and all other communicative dimensions of human life and society.

If we define *competence* as “the proper disposition and ability to understand and handle communication processes in a professional and responsible way”, it becomes clear that we need first dispositions which are determined by deeper principles like trust and responsibility, or the cardinal virtues with prudence as the first among them. Dispositions are determined by family, upbringing, education and culture which contribute to develop a critical mind and the consistence needed in the process...

It is helpful to distinguish between different levels or areas of competence to see the broad field and challenge before us; While the German document lists only four levels of competence, we need to extend them to at least seven. Here are the levels:

1. There is first the *technical competence* which means the proper knowledge and handling of technical means of communications. This technical knowledge was in the past mainly left to producers and presenters of the traditional “mass” media but is today extended to almost everybody. Here are some examples from own experience:

- In the old days to use transparencies (with the overhead projector) in teaching was considered already very professional; today it is ‘substituted’ by powerpoint and it should not be only texts but more and more also pictures and if possible even videos and the like!
- In the old days family pictures used to be important. Today images must be moving, in video format, which everybody can shoot with his cellphone camera and handheld gadget.
- Even the earlier cellphones had only one built in camera to capture and archive the outside world. Now there must be at least two cameras in the phone because I myself am so important and need to see myself in all my ‘beauty’ (‘selfies’); How else can I otherwise show myself to my ‘Facebook’ friends?
- Every day new tablets, cellphones and similar products reach the market...Do I need to handle all of them?

From these examples it is clear: even ‘technical competence’ is more than technical use. It entails my personal decision if, how and when I want to share myself with others on different levels of my life (‘privacy’). Thus technical competence actually is not just ‘technical’ but needs rather a personal decision if, where and how I am going to apply a respective technology.

2. The next is the *critical competence*. This again does not just apply only to media and media education. It is needed for any means and ways of communication in different situations. Critical competence enables one to judge communication structures, processes and

situations and their partners in a proper and responsible way. Questions come up like: Is it opportune to ask this question at this occasion? Is it prudent to bring a certain theme up for discussion at all? There are many situations in life where these concerns come into play. Actually one can find even some corresponding advice in several letters of the great Communicator St. Paul the Apostle... For critical competence, we need the ability for proper judgment but also the proper assessment of people and situations. We not only need life experience but also a proper disposition for prudence and other virtues in life.

3. *Creative Competence* is another disposition which is especially important in Pastoral Communication. All the discussions on New Evangelization call for a proper creative competence in the kingdom of God. Pope John Paul II and Pope Francis are special examples of creative competence in the way to act and react to certain situations and people in simple but convincing ways. It is not a technique or trick but an inner disposition coming from a deep spirituality which accepts and recognizes people in their dignity and needs....

- This also refers to our way we deal with each other or of simply living communities where proper communication and sharing is the lifeline for their being one in the Lord. This is expressed – or not expressed – in many ways. If, for example, a superior does not sufficiently and properly inform the members of his community about developments and happenings affecting the group he lacks creative competence. Seemingly trivial things also come into play here like simple greetings, interest in the other, a smile and similar signs of solidarity...
- If a superior sends as Christmas greetings just as a prefabricated printed card without any personal note or even signature he lacks creative competence...
- If in publishing e.g. liturgical texts we just print the ‘naked’

text without any explanations, or not even a sentence on the Saints of the day and do not present things in a pleasant and appealing ‘layout’, we might be ‘functional’ but lack creative competence...

- If we cannot ‘trigger’ a pleasant and joyful reaction from people we deal with, we might strongly lack creative competence....

4. Ethics is another field where good communicators have to be competent. ***Ethical Competence*** calls for the ability to judge the content and presentation of communications under ethical perspectives. What is reality? What is fiction in a presentation? How far is it true and factual? In a broader sense this competence often asks for a proper theological or philosophical background in our communicating and a proper sense and relation to responsibility. It demands respect for people and their dignity which is also the field of Moral Theology.

In the secular field, there is quite some literature on Communication Ethics, but very often it is just a presentation of “codes of conduct” for journalists to avoid to get into juridical or personal ‘trouble’. Unfortunately, there is very little literature on Communication Ethics in Christian/ religious understanding and in a broader sense supporting the dignity of people. Ethical competence is grounded on a deep sense and conviction for the dignity of persons, communities and the proper responsibility for everything we do.

5. There are beside these at least three more competencies which have to be listed. The first one of these – to be added to the German list – is ***cultural competence*** which we need to consider especially in our time of globalization and a world which is becoming borderless more and more. The whole field of *Intercultural Communication* is actually ‘devoted’ to this concern. In a continent like Asia with so many different cultures, we need a

much greater sense for the *cultural competence* in our formation programs learning how to deal with people in a dignified way. We need to see: 1. the different cultures and recognize them; 2. we need to try to understand their different ways of expressions but also acknowledge and treasure their different values. Finally we also have to learn how to ‘match’ them in a ‘productive’ way so that dignity of persons and lives are not only respected but also promoted to a certain extent.

Persons like Mateo Ricci or Roberto de Nobili were persons with *cultural competence* and because of that had a great effect far beyond their own time. There are many others who successfully helped to ‘inculturate’ Christianity into the local soil. It was the late Pope John Paul who, as auxiliary bishop of Krakow, pointed already during the discussion of the Council decree *Inter Mirifica* to the importance of culture. Later as Pope he created the Pontifical Council for Culture within the Vatican to underline this importance.

- In a smaller and more personal way, we can also look at the ‘communication culture’ of our communities or even families and learn how to become competent in proper communication with each other also in small groups – everyone with its own ‘culture’..
- It might be also interesting to note here the development of a new ‘classification’ in personality assessment where we do not only confine ourselves any more to the “Intelligence Quotient’ (IQ) and the “Emotional Quotient’ (EQ) only in analyzing and testing people but also the ‘*Cultural Quotient*’ (CQ) of a person. A high CQ shows that a person has a high cultural competence and thus can more easily deal and adapt with people from other cultures.

6. In the field of pastoral and evangelizing communication we need also a proper ‘***theological competence***’. Our communication is

not any more just general or secular. As Christian communicators our way of dealing with people and situations is grounded in the Holy Spirit whom Jesus has promised us for our times. How far do the Holy Spirit and our sharing with the Lord in prayer influence our competence? We know from great communicators like Fulton Sheen and others how their competence in communication came from their prayer and spiritual life...

The great Christian communicators – starting with the Church Fathers like St. Augustine or Gregory the Great based their communication on the Christ experience who is after all the Master of Communication (*Communio et Progressio* 11) which means the ‘Perfect Communicator’.

Theological competence has to be understood in the broad sense also as “*spiritual competence*”. Like all the other competencies also this has the ‘passive’ and an ‘active’ dimensions which refer to receiving and spending which means in the spiritual/theological sense to be able to be touched by the Holy as well as to invite and invoke the spiritual/divine.

For *Theological Competence* in the full sense one might distinguish between four different levels of experience, intensity and approach: 1. “*Holy Competence*” which refers to the ‘holy’ in general as the “numinous” (Rudolf Otto) like religious feelings, being touched by something like words, music, an image etc. It goes from modern day ‘wellness’ to superstition. 2. There follows the “*Religious Competence*” as the ability to live or sense a religious practice like pilgrimage, veneration of images and saints and other popular religious ceremonies which are in Church documents labelled as “popular Piety” (EN 48; EG 122-126). This is the competence for people to see and live their daily lives in a simple religious way 3. The next level is the “*Theological Competence*” in the strict sense, referring to theological studies, teaching, living and interpreting theological texts and preaching

in a proper way. 4. Finally the “*Pastoral Competence*” must be included which refers to the ability to apply theological insights and practices into the daily lives of people. This is reflected in practices of the Church, communities and individuals to integrate faith (Theology, Holy) into their lives and actions. It is also reflected e.g. in the way Catechesis, Bible sharing, meditation and theological studies are integrated into life.

The *Theological Competence* is also reflected in our academic program at the University of Santo Tomas in Manila (UST) where we list the triple “openness” to God, to Self and to Others as the basis of any Communication Spirituality. We are not properly *competent* in our Christian Communication if we are not totally open to God, but also to our own limitations. This is a precondition for being open to others... (cf. Eilers, 2009).

7. Finally there is the *professional competence* which we need in Social Communication. One might distinguish between the *practical competence* and the need for *academic studies and research* in Social Communication. Every profession needs proper training to make people ‘professional’. This means they are able to fulfill their profession – from the baker to the plumber, from the writing journalist to the one working with images and other means. If we look at the Church: how many of our ‘communicators’ are really professional? Isn’t a priest also supposed to be a professional communicator in the service of the ‘Word’ but how much is he really prepared for this? For many with ordination things come somehow ‘automatically’...

More challenging, however, is the professional need for serious study and research. How far do we really have proper professional research in the social communication of the Church? Are we not more determined by ‘trial and error’ than professional studies? *Inter Mirifica* as well as *Communio et Progressio* demand proper academic research but where is it done?

- Some years ago, the Federation of Asian Bishops Conferences Office for Social Communication (FABC-OSC) made a study about communication programs at Catholic universities in Asia. For the Philippines there were more than 30 Catholic universities with Communication Programs. But none of these programs was Church or even research related. All of them were just teaching programs according to American examples. Not one of them could present a serious research and study program and there was not even any willingness and interest to do so... up till today.
Are there any Catholic or even Christian universities in Asia where research is promoted or are there any outstanding researchers in Social Communication related to Catholic universities or similar institutions?
- There are a few Catholic universities in Rome with communication programs. One of them was the Gregorian University which started a special social communication section more than 30 years ago at the time of Carlo Martini, SJ as the rector of the university. But the 'center' never made it to a faculty and academic grades had to be acquired through one of the existing other faculties. Now the center will become just one section of the Faculty of Sociology which means that Theology is somehow out. At two other Church universities there are faculties, but one of them is similar to the Asian example just like any secular faculty instead of specializing on theological concerns and obligations like e.g. Catechesis, Youth. The other one is just concerned about institutional communication...
- The Pontifical Council for Social Communication has organized in the past years several conferences and international meetings but there seems to be no follow up, not to talk even about serious research...

Where is in all this our professional competence as Christian Communicators and researchers? How many church related researchers

are I academic professionals and how many of them can be found e.g. at international research conferences, where very often first results of studies are presented?

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The different competencies are needed not only for individuals but also for groups of people and communities. It is not only the single person who should be as competent as possible but also individual communities. The image but also the 'efficiency' of a community depends very much on the ability to properly communicate, which does not refer only to technical competence like e.g. the use of media but rather the inner dispositions and abilities which are reflected in proper communicative ways. This means for Christianity to promote and develop communicative – welcoming – persons who are approachable and willing to dialogue on different levels of life and experience which are based on proper competencies.

All this calls for proper communication formation which enables people to inculcate proper competencies not only for 'teaching' but rather for sharing life and experiences. This goes far beyond any "media education" if it is based on technology and technical competencies only ("how to..") but rather builds on personalities which are "formed" to be as competent as possible in the different levels of human life and Christian living in a balanced and mature way.

In fact all competencies are based on proper "dispositions" which build the ground from where they 'grow'. Based on Aristotle Thomas Aquinas (s.th.q.49,2)distinguishes between 'states' and 'dispositions' of a person: 'States' are according to him not necessarily stable and easily lost like sickness and health "because they arise from changeable causes". 'Dispositions', however, like knowledge and virtue "are intrinsically unlikely to be easily lost because they arise from unchangeable causes". Competence is thus not the same like 'skills' which are passing. It is rather the foundation for a proper and responsible ability to handle situations and communicative needs. They are grounded on the inner (stable) disposition of a person which is usually determined by his/her

origin (place, time, culture) but also by respective upbringing, education and especially the religious experience which forms attitudes, views, habits and practices which contribute to the “unchangeable causes” for a disposition.

*

The French bishops referred already on a paper in 1998 to the following dispositions and attitudes which are needed for proper *competencies*:

- To be aware of one’s own identity as a communicator in a Christian perspective
- To have and develop a strong ability to listen...
- The be able to
 - o Analyze motivations and expectations of the other...
 - o Decode properly his/her concerns...
 - o To also foresee his/her reactions to answer in a proper and positive way.

*

Competence in Social Communication seems to be a neglected field which has to be developed. It challenges everybody, especially, however, those responsible in the Church to re-think their strategies and analyze in a more professional way what has to be done to be a better and more professional communicating Church and Community.

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Mythology and Society Continuum: Study of an Indian television serial

Arbind Sinha

The paper is based on primary research done as part of the content analysis of a mega mythological television serial to understanding how the mythology has contributed in continuity of custom and practices and also how much the society has influenced in changing the construction of the mythology to reflect today’s reality and connect it with audience and society.

The study is based on the analysis of legends of ‘Devon Ke Dev Mahadev’, a mythological drama series that is shown on Indian television channel “Life OK” from December 18, 2011 between 8.00 pm to 8.30 pm (Indian time). The story revolves around Lord Shiva or Mahadev – the Lord of Lords as one of the three most powerful mythical characters – Brahma, Vishnu and Mahadev (often called as Mahesh). The serial is a popular serial because, Hindu culture, like many other civilizations in the world, believes more in Devine power and the God and Goddess are the one who supernatural entity. Mahadev is the obvious choice.

The paper attempts to analyse the content of the serial and to see if there is some connect between the dramatized serial with to-day’s world. The author watched the telecast on select days from March to July and observed the parts of drama story and the statements made by some of the characters to compare it with contemporary social system and practices. For further analysis, the clippings from YouTube were referred and the customs were verified with the people belonging to that culture where customs are being practiced.

The study brings out some interesting findings in terms of how the same law of governance, as shown in the serial, is still in practice in modern management, and how the present day customs observed in various Indian cultures have been incorporated in the mythical drama to make it more realistic for the audience to associate these with their own lives and practices. This helps the telecast to hook the audience up with the serial.

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