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## A communication reflection from Evangelii Gaudium: Teachings for Church Institutional Communications

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## A COMMUNICATION REFLECTION FROM *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*: TEACHINGS FOR CHURCH INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

**Key words:** *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis, Church Communications, Evangelization, Communication of the Faith, Digital Culture, Media Education, Peace and Dialogue

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## REFLEKSJA DOTYCZĄCA KOMUNIKACJI NA PODSTAWIE *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*: NAUCZANIE DLA KOŚCIELNYCH INSTYTUCJI ZAJMUJĄCYCH SIĘ ŚRODKAMI KOMUNIKACJI

### Streszczenie

Apostolska adhortacja *Evangelii gaudium* stanowi owoc refleksji papieża Franciszka na temat XIII Zwyczajnego Zgromadzenia Ogólnego Synodu Biskupów, który odbył się w październiku 2012 r. i obradował na temat „Nowa ewangelizacja dla przekazu wiary chrześcijańskiej”. Autor analizuje dokument papieski z perspektywy komunikacji. Niniejsza publikacja nie przedstawia teorii komunikacji, na których opiera się omawiany dokument, ale wydobywa pewne praktyczne nauczanie i zasady przydatne osobom zajmujących się komunikacją w Kościele. Tytuł Adhortacji *Radość Ewangelii* stanowi doskonałą syntezę tonu i intencji papieża oraz prowadzi do naturalnego wniosku, że osoby zajmujące się komunikacją w Kościele odgrywają szczególną rolę w dziele ewangelizacji jako siewcy pokoju i dialogu na świecie.

**Słowa kluczowe:** *Evangelii gaudium*, papież Franciszek, osoby zajmujące się komunikacją w Kościele, ewangelizacja, komunikacja dla wiary, kultura cyfrowa, edukacja medialna, pokój i dialog

## 1. INTRODUCTION

“Today missionary activity still represents the greatest challenge for the Church”<sup>1</sup>. This quote from John Paul II, back in 1990, is still valid today. Obviously the theme of evangelization is present in the Church since her beginning. We are not now going to make a summary of the magisterial and theological or historical debate on the issue. Let us just remember here *Evangelii nuntiandi* from Paul VI, which has been a milestone in the magisterial teaching of the last decades on this issue<sup>2</sup>. My contribution will not have a technical or technological approach; it will have a more general character, and will try to offer a frame and some criteria for how Church communicators might act in the digital environment<sup>3</sup>. Nevertheless, an understanding of the divine nature of the Church, of its sacramentality and its dimension of communion are necessary premises to provide a correct theological framework to any communication analysis<sup>4</sup>.

Evangelization through the media is not new in the Church, but Pope Francis has, in my opinion, caught the moment very well, and his Magisterium fits particularly well into the society that emerges from the digital culture. I will try to approach the subject by examining the first Apostolic Exhortation of Pope Francis, *Evangelii gaudium* (EG), in which he displays in a thorough manner his view of today’s Church mission.

Any text, even a magisterial one, can be read from many perspectives: theological, philosophical, historical, etc. It can also be examined through communication glasses: that’s what I attempt to do. I do not pretend to present the communication theories behind the text, but extract some practical teaching and principles that can be useful for Church communicators.

Literature on Church institutional communications at my University has been extensive, particularly in the last years<sup>5</sup>. It is enough to say now that while faith

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<sup>1</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio* (7 December 1990), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* (8 December 1975).

<sup>3</sup> In this article, the term ‘Church communicators’ essentially refers to the people who work professionally in communications for Church institutions (spokespersons, speech writers, media editors, etc.), although in some cases it is extended to other people who communicate on behalf of the Church (missionaries, priests, etc.)

<sup>4</sup> Particularly useful are the sections of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* devoted to these issues. For example, the article on the Church of the Profession of Faith (nn. 748–959) or the part dedicated to the celebration of the Christian mystery (part II). See also the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen gentium* (November 21, 1964).

<sup>5</sup> See, among others: D. Arasa, *Church Communications through Diocesan Websites. A Model of Analysis*, Edusc, Rome 2008; D. Arasa & J. Milán (a cura di), *Comunicazione della Chiesa e cultura della controversia*, Rome 2010; D. Arasa, L. Cantoni & L.A. Ruiz (eds.), *Religious Internet Communication. Facts, Trends and Experiences in the Catholic Church*, Rome 2010; D. Arasa, C. Mendoza & S. Tapia (eds.), *Church Communication: Creative Strategies for Promoting Cultural Change*, Rome 2016; A. Bailly-Baillière & J. Milán (a cura di), *Comunicazione della Chiesa: Volti, persone, storie*, Rome 2014; M. Carroggio & J.M. La Porte (a cura di), *Gli uffici stampa delle diocesi e delle conferenze episcopali. Comunicazione di qualità fra Chiesa e media*, Rome 2002; S. de la Cierva, *Communication in Church Events. The making of WYD Madrid 2011*, Rome 2014; Y. de la Cierva, J.L. Black

and communication of the faith are the objects of different sciences – Theology and Communications – both intersect and condition the other, and it is at this point of intersection that EG stays. As a pastoral document, EG presents very well both the faith and how that faith needs to be or can be better communicated today. The title of the exhortation itself, “The Joy of the Gospel” is a *capolavoro* (masterpiece) of synthesis: faith is and has to be communicated with joy<sup>6</sup>.

In my reflection, I am going to follow this path: first, I will make a summary and brief general reflection on EG; then, we will examine its five chapters and comment on the different communicational aspects present in them, with a particular emphasis on the contribution that Church communicators may have for peace and dialogue in the world (EG, 233ss); finally, I will draw some conclusions. For the sake of simplicity, I will often use the terms of evangelization, Church communication and Catholic communications without distinction, although I am aware they have different meanings.

### *Summary of the Apostolic Exhortation*

We have already mentioned the pastoral approach of the document. Because of that twist, it touches many of the Church’s theological dimensions: doctrinal, sacramental and liturgical, ecclesiological, biblical, etc. I am not a theologian, so I have trusted other authors to present a brief summary of EG that can serve as a basis for an ulterior analysis of the text from a communication perspective<sup>7</sup>. EG is the fruit of the Pope’s reflection on the XIII Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops gathered from 7–28 October 2012 to discuss the theme: ‘The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith’. It is not necessary to lengthen into a presentation of the apostolic exhortation, but just to quickly summarize the content of its five chapters:

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& C. O’Reilly, *Managing communications for large Church events*, Church, Communication and Culture Vol. 1, Iss. 1, 2016, 110–134; D. Contreras, *La Iglesia católica en la prensa*, Pamplona 2004; J.M. La Porte, *Comunicazione interna e management nel no-profit*, Milano 2003; J.M. La Porte (a cura di), *Introduzione alla Comunicazione Istituzionale della Chiesa*, Rome 2009; J.M. La Porte & B. Mastroianni (a cura di), *Comunicazione della Chiesa: Identità e Dialogo*, Rome 2012; C. Mendoza, *Cultura economica. Elementi di riflessione per la comunicazione istituzionale dei beni temporali della Chiesa*, Rome 2016; J.M. Mora, D. Contreras & M. Carroggio (a cura di), *Direzione strategica della comunicazione nella Chiesa*, Rome 2007; and R. SHAW, Th.L. Mammoser & F.J. Maniscalco, *Dealing with Media for the Church*, Rome 1999.

<sup>6</sup>A very good complement to the analysis of EG would be the study of the communication elements of the final document of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops’ Conferences in Aparecida, Brazil, in which the then Cardinal Bergoglio was chosen to lead the committee that would draft the concluding document for the conference. That analysis, however, would make this article unnecessary longer. The full text of the Aparecida Document can be found at [www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf](http://www.celam.org/aparecida/Ingles.pdf).

<sup>7</sup>Among many possible summaries, for the sake of simplicity, I essentially followed that of Fr. D.V. Meconi SJ, professor of patristic theology at St. Louis University and editor of the *Homiletic and Pastoral Review* (HPR).

The title and first numbers of the exhortation set the tone not only of the text, but of the whole of Francis's mandate, and, consequently, of the tone that he wants for the Church's evangelizing mission: the positive approach of the Christian message<sup>8</sup>.

In the initial pages, the Pope himself summarizes the seven points he decided to focus on: 1) the Church's missionary reform; 2) the challenges faced by pastoral workers; 3) the Church's evangelizing mission; 4), the need for incisive preaching; 5) the inclusion of the poor in society; 6) peace and dialogue; and 7) the spiritual motivations of evangelization (EG, 17). Although all of them are intermingled, the first three relate to the nature of the Church, the fourth is focused on the preaching of the Word of God within the Eucharistic celebration, and the last three mainly refer to the goals and motivations of the evangelizing task<sup>9</sup>. In my opinion, the most interesting issue is the reference to peace and dialogue, which I consider one of the main duties of Catholic communicators, i.e., being sowers of joy and peace.

In Chapter 1, "The Church's Missionary Transformation" (§19–49), pope Francis argues that the heart of the Gospel is missionary: the faith is a gift from God intended to go through each Christian out into others. The Church is being continually reformed by her evangelical zeal and the growth of her members.

Chapter 2, under the title of "Amid the Crisis of Communal Commitment" (§50–109), is the most 'controversial' part because it touches issues which allow many possible approaches. The Pope calls for a more just and equitable economic system. Although he does not condemn capitalism in a direct way, he argues that theories of economic growth on improvement of poor conditions actually do not work. The text launches a prophetic call on the intrinsic problems of the current globalized economy –such as corruption as a cancer of the economy, the idolatry of money, or a competition without charity–, and proposes that finances serve the economy and not the other way around. Pope Francis is very explicit on remembering the social dimension of the Christian faith and in the insistence that the poor need to be included and taken care in the economic system<sup>10</sup>. This chapter also examines the secularization of cultures, which distances the life of men and women from the beauty of the Christian message.

We could easily say that Chapter 3, "The Proclamation of the Gospel" (§110–175), is the heart of the document, exhorting all Christians to go out into their varied worlds to preach the Good News of Christ's love and forgiveness.

Chapter 4, "The Social Dimension of Evangelization" (§176–258), calls strongly for solidarity. It also touches discussible issues, like the appeal for State intervention in the redistribution of economic benefits. Two important topics are developed

<sup>8</sup> EG, 1: "I wish to encourage the Christian faithful to embark upon a new chapter of evangelization marked by this joy, while pointing out new paths for the Church's journey in years to come".

<sup>9</sup> Cf. J.M. La Porte, *Comunicazione della fede e periferie essenziali: alcune riflessioni sulla Evangelii gaudium nell'ambito della Comunicazione*, Conference on the Opening Ceremony of the Academic Year 2014–15 of the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross (7 October 2014). Available in Italian at: <http://www.pusc.it/sites/default/files/pdf/2014/lezione1415.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of periphery used by Pope Francis encompasses all that creates a distance from Christ whether it is material, intellectual or spiritual. For a better understanding of this category, see J.M. La Porte (2014), *Ibidem*.

here: the Church's special inclusion of the poor, and civil peace. Social, ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue are treated as necessary conditions to make such harmony possible.

In the last chapter, "Spirit-filled Evangelizers" (§259–288), the stress is on the "missionary impulse" which comes from the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit to Christ's Church.

## 2. COMMUNICATION FEATURES IN *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*

We start here a long section dedicated to a systematic reading and analysis of EG from a communications perspective, with a special attention to some principles developed by the Pope on peace and dialogue<sup>11</sup>.

### 2.1. SETTING THE TONE: OPTIMISM, ATTRACTIVENESS AND FREEDOM

Reading EG, the first characteristic immediately observed is its positive approach. This optimism comes from a view of faith that recognizes the omnipotence of God's Mercy that we all experience in the "personal encounter with Jesus Christ" (EG, 3)<sup>12</sup>, reason for our hope and happiness (EG, 7)<sup>13</sup>. Pope Francis insists frequently on the comforting joy of being evangelizers since that condition makes us better persons and, in consequence, should also make us more attractive: "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!", says the Pope (EG, 10)<sup>14</sup>.

The permanent "original freshness" of the Gospel renews the communication of the faith. With it, "new avenues arise, new paths of creativity open up" and "more eloquent signs and words with new meaning for today's world" are discovered (EG, 11). This renewed approach to communicating the Gospel is even more necessary than 25 years ago, when St John Paul II spoke of integrating the Gospel

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<sup>11</sup> A slightly different approach regarding the communication implications of the Apostolic Exhortation can be found in G. Tridente, *Abitare i nuovi media alla luce della Evangelii gaudium di Papa Francesco*, in: G. Tridente & B. Mastroianni (a cura di), *La missione digitale. Comunicazione della Chiesa e social media*, Rome 2016, 41–62.

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter *Deus Caritas Est* (25 December 2005), 1: "Being a Christian is not the result of an ethical choice or a lofty idea, but the encounter with an event, a person, which gives life a new horizon and a decisive direction".

<sup>13</sup> Pope Francis quotes here Paul VI, who wrote that the "technological society has succeeded in multiplying occasions of pleasure, yet has found it very difficult to engender joy", Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete in Domino* (9 May 1975), 22.

<sup>14</sup> Numerous are the anecdotes of Pope Francis' sense of humor. Just a small example: the plaque reading "Vietato lamentarsi" [Forbidden to complain] hanging on the door of his "apartment. Cf. also Benedict XVI, *Interview in preparation for the upcoming journey to Bavaria, Germany in September 2006* (5 August 2006): "Christianity, Catholicism, is not a collection of prohibitions: it is a positive option".

“message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications”<sup>15</sup>. Church communicators are to be convinced that the Gospel is not, as some may say, a ‘dry well’, but always has answers for men and women’s concerns. The problem is not the water –content– but how we get it and how to give it to others, that is, the language and the means used reach people. The evangelizing mission requires a generous effort on our side, but most of all is a work of God (EG, 12).

Pope Francis explains that the transmission of the faith requires a delicate respect for others’ freedom. Quoting Benedict XVI, he affirms, “Christians have the duty to proclaim the Gospel without excluding anyone. Instead of seeming to impose new obligations, they should appear as people who wish to share their joy, who point to a horizon of beauty and who invite others to a delicious banquet. It is not by proselytizing that the Church grows, but ‘by attraction’”<sup>16</sup>. In that sense, Pope Francis recommends to Catholics, and Catholic communicators need to make treasure of this advice, that they should have a “definite style of evangelization [...] *in every activity which you undertake*”, moving “from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry” (EG, 18)<sup>17</sup>.

## 2.2. CHAPTER ONE: THE CHURCH’S MISSIONARY TRANSFORMATION

### *Conversion, basis for a pro-active communication*

Even though evangelization operates with the constant assistance of the Holy Spirit, it requires Catholics “to go forth from our own comfort zone” (EG, 20). In communication terms, it demands a proactive approach that takes the initiative – the Popes uses one of his most preferred Spanish verbs here, “*primerear*” – to reach others, getting “involved by word and deed in people’s daily lives”, bridging distances, abasing ourselves if necessary, and “touching the suffering flesh of Christ in others” (EG, 24).

That “going forth”, warns the Pope, will “prove ineffective” in all Church structures if it is not done with “fidelity” to the authentic evangelical spirit (EG, 26). Therefore, any ‘Catholic’ communication system runs the same risk because it is not the name, but the actions, that express the identity. The Pope yearns for a “missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably chan-

<sup>15</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris missio* (7 December 1990), 37c.

<sup>16</sup> EG, 15; Cf. Benedict XVI, *Homily at Mass for the Opening of the Fifth General Conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Bishops* (13 May 2007), Aparecida, Brazil. At this point, the concept of proselytism requires clarification. The mission received by the apostles was, from the beginning of the Church, called proselytism; proselytes were called the non-Jewish converted to Judaism, and thus proselytism became the ordinary way to denominate the apostolate of bringing souls to Christianity and to the different institutions of the Catholic Church. In the last century, the widespread of sects and their aggressive ‘proselytism’ has encouraged Pope Francis to distance himself from that concept and even criticize it.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. 5<sup>th</sup> General Conference Of The Latin American And Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document* (29 June 2007), 370.

neled for the evangelization of today's world rather than for her self-preservation" (EG, 27). That impulse will avoid using a language that people do not understand, as well as proposing topics far from their lives, interests and concerns<sup>18</sup>. The pastoral conversion requires us "to be bold and creative in the task of rethinking the goals, structures, style and methods of evangelization" (EG, 33), which entails giving to every activity a communicative dimension.

### *Communicating the essentials of the faith*

Pope Francis's proposals on how to communicate the Gospel depart from considering the conditions imposed by the media culture:

"In today's world of instant communication and occasionally biased media coverage, the message we preach runs a greater risk of being distorted or reduced to some of its secondary aspects. In this way certain issues which are part of the Church's moral teaching are taken out of the context which gives them their meaning. The biggest problem is when the message we preach then seems identified with those secondary aspects which, important as they are, do not in and of themselves convey the heart of Christ's message. We need to be realistic and not assume that our audience understands the full background to what we are saying, or is capable of relating what we say to the very heart of the Gospel which gives it meaning, beauty and attractiveness" (EG, 34).

In the communication ecosystem, there is an inevitable banalization of the message, much increased through the phenomena of the Echo chambers<sup>19</sup>. Accepting that this is the way things are, the message proposed by Church communicators "has to concentrate on the essentials, on what is most beautiful, most grand, most appealing and at the same time most necessary". In that way, "the message [...] becomes all the more forceful and convincing" (EG, 35)<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>18</sup> The call for a "resolute process of discernment, purification and reform" (EG, 30) reaches all Church communities from the local to the universal level. Pope Francis himself is leading this process and spirit of reform (EG, 32), which is principally interior and spiritual, but reaches also into Vatican structures. The Vatican reform's process goes beyond the goals of this paper, but two articles published in the "Church, Communication and Culture" journal may shed some light on this regard: the first one, focused on the Vatican economic reform (C. Mendoza, *Defining forms of public space: a frame for understanding 'the Vatican's economic reform'*, Church, Communication and Culture, Vol. 1, Iss. 1, 2016, 26–46); the second, zooming into a question again raised by the spirit of reform, i.e., the exercise of public opinion "in" the Church (N. González Gaitano, *Public opinion in the Church. A communicative and ecclesiological reflection*, Church, Communication and Culture, Vol. 1, Iss. 1, 2016, 173–205).

<sup>19</sup> According to Walter Quattrociocchi, the concept of Echo Chambers is a metaphoric description to define "an isolated space on the web, where the ideas being exchanged essentially just confirm one another. It can be a space of likeminded people sharing similar political views, or a page about a specific conspiracy theory. Once inside one of these spaces, users are sharing information that is all very similar, basically 'echoing' each other" ("How does misinformation spread online? <https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2016/01/q-a-walter-quattrociocchi-digital-wildfires/>, January 14, 2016). Also cf. S. Flaxman, S. Goel & J.M. Rao, *Filter Bubbles, Echo Chambers, and Online News Consumption*, Public Opinion Quarterly, Vol. 80, Iss. S1, 2016, 298–320, <https://doi.org/10.1093/poq/nfw006>.

<sup>20</sup> The importance of not losing time and energies in media disputes is very well presented by M. Carroggio, *Il Dipartimento di Comunicazione della Chiesa e la Gestione delle Controversie*, in: D. Arasa & J. Milán (a cura di), *Comunicazione della Chiesa e cultura della controversia*, Rome 2010, 19–49, as well as by B. Mastroianni, *Dibattiti online: oltre le contrapposizioni*, in: G. Tridente & B. Mastroianni (a cura di), *La missione digitale. Comunicazione della Chiesa e social media*, Rome 2016, 63–95.

At no point is the Pope proposing to annul or eliminate part of the Christian message (EG, 36), but encourages us to prioritize our messages. The Church is a “field hospital after battle”<sup>21</sup> and needs to concentrate in healing the wounds of society. That merciful approach brings us to focusing our communication on primary anthropological issues such as the truth about man and woman, marriage or family, not as theoretical concepts but as realities affecting our contemporaries<sup>22</sup>. The Pope insists on the integrity and the “sense of proportion” of the message to be transmitted (EG, 38). Doing so, “the centrality of certain truths is evident and it becomes clear that Christian morality is not a form of stoicism, or self-denial, or merely a practical philosophy or a catalogue of sins and faults” (EG, 39).

### *Humble and courageous testimony*

Christian communicators have the same obligations and rights as their contemporaries in contributing to improve society, but they do so with the deep conviction, rooted in their faith, of following the mandate of spreading the joy of the Gospel without imposing it... Indeed, who would be able to *impose* joy? However, “with the holy intent of communicating the truth about God and humanity, we sometimes give them a false god or a human ideal which is not really Christian. In this way, we hold fast to a formulation while failing to convey its substance” (EG, 41). Conversely, there are also many positive initiatives in the Church that communicate “unchanging truths in a language which brings out their abiding newness” (EG, 41). Two examples, among others, are *Catholic Voices* and *Arguments*<sup>23</sup>.

Accepting human limitations, ours and those of the others, is a premise in order not to get discouraged in communicating the Gospel, since “we will never be able to make the Church’s teachings easily understood or readily appreciated by everyone” (EG, 42). The Pope reminds us that it is not enough to tell the truth, and witness it but, as a third step, to teach how to live it<sup>24</sup>, even accepting that there are some of the Church’s “rules or precepts which may have been quite effective in past times,

<sup>21</sup> The Pope has used this expression in several of his homilies and audiences.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Francis, *Address to participants in the international colloquium on the complementarity between man and woman sponsored by the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (17 November 2014), 3: “We must not fall into the trap of being limited by ideological concepts. The family is an anthropological fact, and consequently a social, cultural fact, etc. We cannot qualify it with ideological concepts which are compelling at only one moment in history, and then decline. Today there can be no talk of the conservative family or the progressive family: family is family! Do not allow yourselves to be qualified by this, or by other ideological concepts. The family has a force of its own”.

<sup>23</sup> *Catholic Voices* is a communications project created in 2010 in the UK to amplify the Church’s voice in the media during the visit of Benedict XVI that year. It is now present in more than 23 countries worldwide. See [www.catholicvoices.org.uk](http://www.catholicvoices.org.uk) and A. Ivereigh & K. Lopez, *How to Defend the Faith Without Raising Your Voice* (OSV Publications 2012, new ed. 2015). *Arguments* is an association promoted by Spanish youth with the goal of providing multimedia materials for catechesis: [www.arguments.es](http://www.arguments.es) (particularly interesting is its YouTube channel: [www.youtube.com/user/catequesisarguments](http://www.youtube.com/user/catequesisarguments)).

<sup>24</sup> The union between faith, testimony and mission was already very much present in the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii nuntiandi* by Paul VI (8 December 1975).

but “no longer have the same usefulness for directing and shaping people’s lives” (EG, 43)<sup>25</sup>.

Catholic communications should also be characterized by welcoming everyone instead of becoming experts in criticism: “The Church is not a tollhouse” (EG, 47). Francis calls for a Church not concerned “with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures”. He prefers “a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security” (EG, 49). In other words, he invites communicators not to be afraid of making mistakes. What distances people from the truth are not errors, but lies. It does not mean being imprudent, but courageous; nor does it mean not setting priorities, but having the flexibility to change plans and adapt to circumstances.

### 2.3. CHAPTER TWO: AMID THE CRISIS OF COMMUNAL COMMITMENT

#### *Comprehending external challenges*

Notwithstanding the great advances in social welfare, the Pope admits that our “age of knowledge and information” has led to “new and often anonymous kinds of power” (EG, 52), characterized by a “throw away” culture, a globalization of indifference (EG, 54), an idolatry of money (EG, 55), and an exclusion and inequality which spawns violence (EG, 59). Facing these abuses, the Church cannot be afraid or tired of denouncing oppression and violence, especially the forgotten conflicts and the persecution of Christians. And, let’s say it, this is probably one of the things Catholic media does best<sup>26</sup>.

However, challenges to the communication of the Gospel are of many kinds, not only economic or material, but also cultural: attacks on religious freedom, relativistic indifference, fundamentalism, secularization and consumerism, individualism and family crisis, superficiality, and globalization that crashes local cultures. These problems harm more than not only the Church but also society, and so, the Church’s concerns do not respond to an egoistic intra-ecclesial conservation, but to society as a whole (EG, 61).

The spread of new religious movements, many of which propose a spirituality without God, has to urge Catholics and Catholic media to a serious examination of conscience:

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<sup>25</sup> The Pope has invited priests on several public occasions to make the confessional a place of encounter with the Mercy of God and not a “torture chamber” (EG, 44). This idea can be applied to the prophetic mission that the Catholic media has in denouncing society’s flaws: one thing is to denounce the sin, another is to criticize the sinner.

<sup>26</sup> Among the many initiatives that the Christian inspired media promote, I would like to mention two: 1) “Where God Weeps” (<http://wherogodweeps.org/wp/>), a weekly Catholic TV program promoted by *Church in Need*, a charity appealing for donations for the pastoral needs of the persecuted and oppressed Church around the world; and 2), “Stand Together” ([www.allstandtogether.com](http://www.allstandtogether.com)), a shared multimedia project to give voice to persecuted Christian minorities.

“If part of our baptized people lack a sense of belonging to the Church, this is also due to certain structures and the occasionally unwelcoming atmosphere of some of our parishes and communities, or to a bureaucratic way of dealing with problems [...]. In many places an administrative approach prevails over a pastoral approach, as does a concentration on administering the sacraments apart from other forms of evangelization” (EG, 63).

Moreover, in today’s world “the Church is perceived as promoting a particular prejudice and as interfering with individual freedom”. A possible response is providing a media education “which teaches critical thinking and encourages the development of mature moral values” (EG, 64) and helps to propose in creative and attractive ways the truths of the Gospel without the appearance of an authoritarian imposition. This creativity can be helped by the credibility that the Church has in the public opinion “as a mediator in finding solutions to problems affecting peace, social harmony, the land, the defence of life, human and civil rights, and so forth”, in order to make it understood that “when we raise other questions less palatable to public opinion, we are doing so out of fidelity to precisely the same convictions about human dignity and the common good” (EG, 65).

Francis pinpoints the “breakdown” of passing down the Christian faith to the young” as one of the main challenges for inculturating the faith (EG, 70). Surely, the role of Catholic media in promoting popular devotion and religious traditions is very significant in facing “contemporary secularism” (EG, 68), but evangelizing cultures, that is, proposing models of society inspired by Revelation that transform societies from within, demands much more. Catholic media needs to undertake the task of supporting Catholics in their convictions, but its role is much more profound: inculturation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century means presenting every day the reasons for hope, accepting the positive values the global media culture brings with it and spotting its negative anthropological consequences. Inculturation of the faith and, thus, communication of the faith, are missions too important to be resolved in a tweet. Rethinking the comprehension of our faith and presenting it in a new way goes together with the conviction that faith goes beyond time and space, beyond today and tomorrow’s technologies<sup>27</sup>.

### *Accepting internal challenges*

A great obstacle for some Catholics is an “inferiority complex” which leads them to conceal their Christian identity and convictions and “weakens their commitment” (EG, 79). It is a fundamental responsibility of Church communications to build up and empower the faithful’s Catholic identity, making them conscious that their mission is part of their identity. Unfortunately, internal communications, which has lots to say about that, is not always a priority in Church’s institutions.

The Pope warns priests –and we could extend these words to other Church communicators– of the egoistic obsession of considering the task of evangelization as a “dangerous poison” for personal freedom and self-realization (EG, 81).

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<sup>27</sup> J.M. La Porte (2014), *Ibidem*.

Moreover, says the Pope, the obsession with immediate results makes it hard for evangelizers “to tolerate anything that smacks of disagreement, possible failure, criticism” (EG, 82). A learning experience for Church communicators can be found here: the participation of Church institutions in the media debate, particularly in social media, teaches us the need to promote dialogue and generate interaction, but also to accept criticism. Confronting others’ opinions or ideas does not necessarily imply renouncing to our own, but helps us to reflect and delve into them, while improving and purifying our arguments.

In any communication enterprise, analysis is needed in order to undertake realistic actions. But realism, if it is not seen in the light of faith, can produce a sterile pessimism because of the fact of the “spiritual *desertification*” in today’s secularized societies (EG, 86). This desertification is not religious but it also a cultural devastation of basic anthropological concepts<sup>28</sup>. Contreras has put it brilliantly, explaining that this rapid deterioration requires Church communicators to promote a course of slow but efficacious “cultural reforestation”, not just related to spiritual values, but to human values in general<sup>29</sup>. Solutions are not easy, but communication, and social media in particular, “turn into greater possibilities for encounter and solidarity for everyone” (EG, 87), especially when embodied with a “revolution of tenderness” (EG, 88)<sup>30</sup>.

The main obstacle to this encounter with people is a “spiritual worldliness” in Catholic evangelizers (EG, 93). For Pope Francis, there are two main causes: first, a subjective faith; secondly, “a supposed soundness of doctrine or discipline” that leads “to a narcissistic and authoritarian elitism”, whereby instead of evangelizing, “others are analyzed and classified and instead of opening the door to grace, evangelizers exhaust their energies in inspecting and verifying” (EG, 94). Catholic media also runs this risk of being accusatory and not proposing solutions; that quality does not mean being indulgent with the error, but focusing on the positive elements<sup>31</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. Benedict XVI, *Homily at Mass for the Opening of the Year of Faith* (11 October 2012): “Recent decades have seen the advance of a spiritual ‘desertification’ [...]. But it is in starting from the experience of this desert, from this void, that we can again discover the joy of believing [...]. In the desert we rediscover the value of what is essential for living; thus in today’s world there are innumerable signs, often expressed implicitly or negatively, of the thirst for God, for the ultimate meaning of life”.

<sup>29</sup> D. Contreras, *Framing e News Values nell’informazione sulla Chiesa cattolica*, in: J.M. Mora, D. Contreras & M. Carroggio (a cura di), *Direzione strategica della comunicazione nella Chiesa*, Rome 2007, 121–136.

<sup>30</sup> Catholic initiatives that follow this positive, open and modern attitude to respond to the queries and needs of our contemporaries are, for example, *Aleteia* and *ChurchPOP*. *Aleteia* ([www.aleteia.org](http://www.aleteia.org)) is an online publication, distributed in seven languages (English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, Italian, Arabic and Polish), that claims to reach more than 9 million unique visitors a month; it offers a Christian vision of the world by providing general and religious content; as a for-profit organization its revenues derive principally from advertising income, *premium* subscriptions and e-commerce. *ChurchPOP* (<http://church-pop.com>) is a brand using several different social media platforms to present Christian culture in a fun, informative, and inspirational way.

<sup>31</sup> Cf. Francis, *Message for the 51<sup>st</sup> World Communications Day “Communicating Hope and Trust in our Time”* (24 January 2017).

The Pope insists that this “insidious worldliness” is even present in some Catholics who, among other negative manifestations, show “an ostentatious preoccupation for the liturgy, for doctrine and for the Church’s prestige, but without any concern that the Gospel have a real impact on God’s faithful people and the concrete needs of the present time”. In these attitudes, the mark of Christ is not present and “evangelical fervour is replaced by the empty pleasure of complacency and self-indulgence” (EG, 95). Pope Francis is hard on those who “waste time talking about *what needs to be done*” (EG, 96). The task of denouncing needs to be always accompanied by humble testimony.

Finally, clericalism appears still today a Church’s internal problem since lay people are kept away from decision-making. The Pope insists on the “significant pastoral challenge” of “the formation of the laity and the evangelization of professional and intellectual life” (EG, 102) as well as the need to increase the presence of women in the “settings where important decisions are made, both in the Church and in social structures” (EG, 103). Media education is therefore essential in providing this auto-criticism and helping ordinary Christians to take up their own responsibilities in society.

#### 2.4. CHAPTER THREE: THE PROCLAMATION OF THE GOSPEL

##### *Communicating the faith, a task for everyone*

The heart of the exhortation recalls that evangelization is a mission of the entire Church. In fact, it is not possible to limit the communication of the Church to that of an institutional, official or magisterial character (EG, 111). The actions of individual Christians and their personal encounter with others in their own environment are always the main channels for an effective evangelization.

While keeping safe the “principle of the primacy of grace” (EG, 112), the role of Church communications is that of presenting the Church as “a place of mercy”, where “everyone can feel welcomed, loved, forgiven and encouraged to live the good life of the Gospel” (EG, 114). The Church becomes an attractive harbor for all when, in the first place, accepts that “every culture offers positive values and forms which can enrich the way the Gospel is preached, understood and lived” (EG, 116). The Gospel’s “content is transcultural” and, “when properly understood, cultural diversity is not a threat to Church unity” (EG, 117). It is precisely the search and efforts for unity that make the Church “a model of peace in our world” (EG, 130); promoting dialogue among cultures is thus an essential task of communicators<sup>32</sup>.

Obviously, that missionary task requires a formation – doctrinal, human, spiritual – and, in the case of communicators, a particular media training. Let us just recall here some words of EG that are particularly important in academic and intellectual environments:

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<sup>32</sup> The Professional Seminars for Church Communication Offices organized at the Pontifical University of the Holy Cross are a positive example on this regard: <http://en.pusc.it/csi/attivita/convegna> .

“Proclaiming the Gospel message to different cultures also involves proclaiming it to professional, scientific and academic circles. This means an encounter between faith, reason and the sciences with a view to developing new approaches and arguments on the issue of credibility, a creative apologetics which would encourage greater openness to the Gospel on the part of all. When certain categories of reason and the sciences are taken up into the proclamation of the message, these categories then become tools of evangelization” (EG, 132)<sup>33</sup>.

A large portion of EG is dedicated to the preaching ministry of homilies. That task, so important for evangelization, is not directly related to the world of media, but to personal communication. However, in the paragraphs dedicated to the homily (EG, 135–159) there are some other lessons which can be extended to Church institutional communications in general. In the first place, EG comes as a new inspiration for today’s priestly formation on communication<sup>34</sup>. Other conclusions that the section on homilies offers for Church communication may be synthesized as follows:

- a) The use of parables and images, also taken from the beauty of the liturgy, is very valuable for a narrative of evangelization (EG, 142, and 24);
- b) The demand for the professional communicator to dedicate “a prolonged time of study, prayer, reflection and pastoral creativity”, because not preparing himself would be “dishonest and irresponsible with the gifts he has received” (EG, 145);
- c) The importance of focusing on people’s real interests and avoiding “questions that nobody asks” (EG, 155);
- d) The appeal to imagery in communication (EG, 157);
- f) The use of a language that people understand (EG, 158); and
- g) The positivity of the message that looks with hope to future (EG, 159)<sup>35</sup>.

### *A kerygmatic communication*

Among the most useful ideas for Church institutional communications proposed by EG it is the Pope’s emphasis on the need for a kerygmatic evangelization,

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<sup>33</sup> Cf. EG, 134: “Universities are outstanding environments for articulating and developing this evangelizing commitment in an interdisciplinary and integrated way. Catholic schools, which always strive to join their work of education with the explicit proclamation of the Gospel, are a most valuable resource for the evangelization of culture, even in those countries and cities where hostile situations challenge us to greater creativity in our search for suitable methods”. Another example carried on at the Pontifical University of Santa Croce is the project “Poetics and Christianity”, an international study forum on the confluence between artistic culture and expressions of the faith: <http://en.pusc.it/csi/attivita/convegni>

<sup>34</sup> As a personal experience, on not a few occasions, when people I encounter come to know that I am a professor of Communication, they often ask me the same, or similar, questions: ‘Don’t you think priest should communicate better? Why don’t you form priests in preaching better?’ This anecdote illustrates the general impression that ordinary people have, with more or less reason, about priests’ preparation.

<sup>35</sup> EG, 159: “A good homily is that it is positive. It is not so much concerned with pointing out what shouldn’t be done, but with suggesting what we can do better. In any case, if it does draw attention to something negative, it will also attempt to point to a positive and attractive value, lest it remain mired in complaints, laments, criticisms and reproaches. Positive preaching always offers hope, points to the future, does not leave us trapped in negativity.”

that is focusing on the first announcement as “the centre of all evangelizing activity” (EG, 164). In a moment of widespread secularization and rampant ignorance on Christian doctrine, faith issues and even basic anthropological values, it does not seem an advisable communication strategy to put into public dominion the discussion of expert topics. What is much more needed is going back to the essentials of the faith. The kerygma has some characteristics applicable to institutional communications:

“It has to express God’s saving love which precedes any moral and religious obligation on our part; it should not impose the truth but appeal to freedom; it should be marked by joy, encouragement, liveliness and a harmonious balance which will not reduce preaching to a few doctrines which are at times more philosophical than evangelical” (EG, 165).

Considering the multimedia environment, the kerygmatic approach of Church communicators could more often use mystagogy – or interpretation of religious mysteries – and present in a renewed fashion the liturgical signs of Christian initiation (EG, 166). In this direction, the *via pulchritudinis* (way of beauty) seems a very effective path of communication of the faith: “Proclaiming Christ means showing that to believe in and to follow him is not only something right and true, but also something beautiful, capable of filling life with new splendour and profound joy, even in the midst of difficulties” (EG, 167)<sup>36</sup>. A way to show this beauty is through “the use of the arts in evangelization, building on the treasures of the past but also drawing upon the wide variety of contemporary expressions so as to transmit the faith in a new ‘language of parables’” (EG, 167).

## 2.5. CHAPTER FOUR: THE SOCIAL DIMENSION OF EVANGELIZATION

### *Communicating to change society*

The “profound connection between evangelization and human advancement” (EG, 178) appears strong in EG. Christian communications cannot but bring forth a primary response to “seek and protect the good of others” (EG, 178). In fact, “the Gospel is not merely about our personal relationship with God” or simply “an accumulation of small personal gestures to individuals in need”; both Christian’s teaching and life “are meant to have an impact on society” (EG, 180).

The “mandate of charity” (“Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation”, *Mk* 16:15) “encompasses all dimensions of existence [...] and all peoples” (EG, 181). Therefore, there are no issues that Catholics, and Catholic media, cannot touch, since “the creation refers to every aspect of human life” (EG, 181). That fact implies that Church’s teaching on social questions, even if susceptible of “further developments” and “open to discussion”, has “to draw practical conclusions” (EG, 182). According to Pope Francis, “an authentic faith [...] always involves a deep desire to change the world, to transmit values, to leave this earth somehow better than we found it” (EG, 183); hence Church communications “can-

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<sup>36</sup> Cf. Pontifical Council For Culture, *Concluding Document of the Plenary Assembly “The Via Pulchritudinis, Privileged Pathway for Evangelisation and Dialogue”*, 2006.

not and must not remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice”, but, always with a hopeful approach that offers proposals, work for positive change and search for unity (EG, 183)<sup>37</sup>.

In this direction, there are two issues that Pope Francis considers determinant for the future of mankind: the inclusion of the poor in society, and peace and social dialogue (EG, 185).

The Magisterium on the poor as “privileged recipients of the Gospel” (EG, 48) is constant in the Petrine ministry<sup>38</sup>. Not for nothing, Francis has instituted a World Day for the Poor to be celebrated for the first time in November 2017<sup>39</sup>. Attention to the poor is a mission of all in the Church, but Catholic media play a particular role in the “creation of a new mindset which thinks in terms of community and the priority of the life of all over the appropriation of goods by a few” (EG, 188). At the same time, Church communication cannot remain at the stage of denouncing poverty; it should propose solutions “to eliminate the structural causes of poverty and to promote the integral development of the poor, as well as fostering small daily acts of solidarity in meeting the real needs” of people (EG, 188).

However, Francis warns, “changing structures without generating new convictions and attitudes will only ensure that those same structures will become, sooner or later, corrupt, oppressive and ineffectual” (EG, 189). Through a sound, transcendent anthropological view, Church communications can help bring about a “new political and economic mindset” helpful “to break down the wall of separation between the economy and the common good of society” (EG, 205). A danger for Church communications would be that of focusing on intra-ecclesial issues, with the risk of putting the Church’s interests before those of society. Giving voice to the voiceless and defending all vulnerable persons are fundamental pieces of the Catholic media’s mission. Nevertheless, beyond the attention to material poverty, Pope Francis recalls that “the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care” (EG, 200)<sup>40</sup>.

### *Church communicators, sowers of peace and joy*

It is the section on the common good and peace in society (EG, 217–237) in which I want to mainly focus in coming paragraphs. The reflections extracted from here may help us to understand the role of Church communicators who, as we men-

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<sup>37</sup> Pope Francis cites the examples of St Francis of Assisi or Mother Therese of Calcutta, which can be good testimonies for Church media to use to illustrate the desire for building a better society.

<sup>38</sup> EG, 198: “For the Church, the option for the poor is primarily a theological category rather than a cultural, sociological, political or philosophical one. [...] This is why I want a Church which is poor and for the poor. They have much to teach us. Not only do they share in the *sensus fidei*, but in their difficulties they know the suffering Christ. [...] We are called to find Christ in them, to lend our voice to their causes, but also to be their friends, to listen to them, to speak for them and to embrace the mysterious wisdom which God wishes to share with us through them.”

<sup>39</sup> Francis, *Message for the 1<sup>st</sup> World Day of the Poor* “*Let us love, not with words but with deeds*” (19 November 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Solutions to poverty other than material had already been expressed by Pope Francis in his Encyclical letter *Laudato si'* (24 May 2015), 139: “Strategies for a solution demand an integrated approach to combating poverty, restoring dignity to the excluded, and at the same time protecting nature”.

tioned above, are called to be sowers of peace and joy, promoters of a “culture of encounter” (EG, 220).

My reflection is based in four principles outlined by the Pope: 1) Time is greater than space; 2) Unity prevails over the conflict; 3) Reality is more important than ideas; and 4) The whole is greater than the part. Obviously, my proposals on Church institutional communications –and I apologize for this again – are a reductive application of what the Holy Father intends with these principles (EG, 221). Nevertheless, they can very well be integrated into this discussion on digital communication as a challenge for Church’s evangelization efforts; moreover, they can be applied at all Church levels: central and local government, religious institutes, educational institutions, non-profit organizations, etc.

### *1. Time is greater than space (EG, 222–225)<sup>41</sup>*

“This principle enables us to work slowly but surely, without being obsessed with immediate results. It helps us patiently to endure difficult and adverse situations, or inevitable changes in our plans. It invites us to accept the tension between fullness and limitation, and to give a priority to time” (EG, 223)

Applying this principle to institutional communications means, among other things, having a strategic mindset, that often should be crystalized into a communications plan. Every strategic communication plan includes two essential elements: defining goals and establishing priorities.

- a) Defining goals: salvation of souls is unquestionably the final motivation of evangelization and Church communications activities; however, realism requires that one define intermediate steps in order to reach those goals, taking into account that not everything is possible at the same time. This does not mean renouncing desirable objectives, but not trying to reach all of them at the same time.
- b) Establishing priorities: the Pope invites us to give more attention to the important than to the urgent. In the communications field, and particularly in the digital environment, this could be applied to anticipating the cultural debates<sup>42</sup>. Church communicators need to improve the analysis and evaluation of trends in order to foresee the issues that the Church will have to face in the future and prepare the best way to respond to them. Unfortunately, a general misconception some Church media professionals and many Church leaders have is considering communication almost exclusively as a communication crisis<sup>43</sup>.

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<sup>41</sup> Francis made reference to this principle at the beginning of his pontificate: cf. Encyclical Letter *Lumen gentium* (29 June 2013), 57.

<sup>42</sup> Anticipating potential debates is what the discipline of ‘issues management’ tries to pin. According to Elizabeth Douglas, “issues management is an anticipatory, strategic management process that helps organizations detect and respond appropriately to emerging trends or changes in the socio-political environment. These trends or changes may then crystallize into an ‘issue’, which is a situation that evokes the attention and concern of influential organizational publics and stakeholders. At its best, issues management is stewardship for building, maintaining and repairing relationships with stakeholders and stakeholders (Heath, 2002)”: <http://www.instituteforpr.org/issues-management/>

<sup>43</sup> The recently deceased Joaquín Navarro-Valls, for more than 20 years director of the Press Office of the Holy See and spokesperson of saint John Paul II, affirmed in an interview offered in 2006: “Communication crisis needs to be prepared in peace times”.

The example of gender ideology can help. I do not think this is an issue that affects only the Church, but I think that we, as Catholics, arrived too late to face this battle. We started to fight it when it was too late. Most Western countries' legislatures have enforced laws in the direction of supporting gender ideology, while media pressure has imposed a ban on any attempt to tender opposition. Do not misunderstand me: I am convinced that in the end we will win the cultural war, but so many casualties could have been avoided if a more intelligent communication approach had been anticipated. There are many other controversial issues that have arisen or will arise in the coming future, with slightly different intensity from country to country. Some of them are already showing their potential virulence, like the initial steps of a Caribbean hurricane: transhumanism (interaction between man and technology); integration of Muslims in traditionally Christian societies; transparency on Church finances; disruptive intromission of new technologies in family life and youth education; post-truth; and so forth and so on.

On the other hand, the principle of "time is greater than space" is also an invitation to risk. Those responsible for Church communications should not expect favorable circumstance or ideal means, which only exist in imagination, before bringing forward their communication plans. Equally, they cannot back away in the face of objective or subjective obstacles in the public arena. Perfectly applicable here is the maxim of "a bird in hand is worth two in the bush".

At the same time, the above principle calls for collaboration. We need, says the Pope, "to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups" (EG, 223). Effective communication calls to action and inspires others. For example, beyond religion and faith frontiers, Church communicators are catalyzers of many other organizations in the defense of human dignity, and make a common front to propose solutions in benefit of all.

Finally, the 'time principle' requires endurance and patience. The Pope explains it through the parable of the weeds among the wheat (cf. *Mt* 13:24–30) (EG, 225). It may seem not very academic, but the example is gorgeous. In short, the parable tells the action of the evil sowers, who sow weeds among the wheat while the workers of the field sleep. Several teachings for Church communicators can be extracted from it:

- First, not blaming others for our own limits and defects: the lack of vigilance of the 'country keepers' is not the cause of the evil wrongdoing, but certainly is a condition for that to happen. As we said before, how often Catholics leave the media and cultural debates in the hands of the 'evil sowers' because of discomfort, fear or incompetence!
- Second, not complaining or losing serenity in the face of difficulties: "an evangelizing community [...] cares for the grain and does not grow impatient at the weeds" (EG, 24). "The evil spirit of defeatism is brother to the temptation to separate, before its time, the wheat from the weeds; it is the fruit of an anxious and self-centred lack of trust" (EG, 85).
- Third, a faithful trust in the final victory of good over evil. Church communications are not only positive and respectful, but always hopeful.

## 2. *Unity prevails over conflict* (EG, 226–230)

In all human organizations, even with the highest ideals and the best of the intentions of their members, "conflict cannot be ignored or concealed" (EG, 226). Also in the Church, like any other organism, there is a struggle for unity, since conflict is inherent (EG, 226). The "best way to deal with it" is "the willingness to face

conflict head on, to resolve it and to make it a link in the chain of a new process” (EG, 227)<sup>44</sup>.

Overcoming conflict entails, first of all, a solid identity from which internal dialogue can develop. Church communicators need a profound understanding of the institution they work for. Through a culture of dialogue and respect and with the help of professional internal communication, they can “go beyond the surface of the conflict” and see others “in their deepest dignity” (EG, 228). Getting in the others’ shoes, trying to understand and listening to their reasons, respecting diversity, being open to changing one’s own mind, are manifestations of the real dialogue that brings forward unity<sup>45</sup>.

For the Pope, it is through solidarity that “conflicts, tensions and oppositions can achieve a diversified and life-giving unity. This is not to opt for a kind of syncretism, or for the absorption of one into the other, but rather for a resolution which takes place on a higher plane and preserves what is valid and useful on both sides” (EG, 228).

The mission of a Christian communicator is spreading the peace that proceeds from Christ. A coherent personal spiritual life is therefore the best entrance hall and guarantee for an effective social life according to Christ’s teachings (EG, 229).

We, as communicators, need to form ourselves in a culture of respect, reciprocal knowledge, and dialogue, which are the pillars that enable us to offer our contribution in overcoming conflict and promoting unity, and reaching a “reconciled diversity” (EG, 230).

Also, the pursuit of unity is related to a concept that, at a first glance, may seem far from the Church’s life but touches the heart of the communicator’s prestige, i.e. accountability. Being accountable for one’s decisions, recognizing mistakes and assuming the consequences, as well as granting the request of others for forgiveness of their own misdemeanors, are part of the effort in promoting unity, overcoming conflict and entering into a process of reconciliation.

### 3. *Realities are more important than ideas* (EG, 231–233)<sup>46</sup>

We are aware that Christians are not just followers of a doctrine and Christianity is not a ‘religion of the book’. We follow a Person, Jesus Christ, the Second Person of the Trinity, the Son of God, who became man, live among us, died in the

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<sup>44</sup> The fact that the Church is involved in polemic does not necessarily mean that she is doing wrong. Many times controversies are inevitable and are the consequences of right attitudes of Church members. Cf. M. Carroggio, (2010), *Ibidem*. In this sense, St Josemaría Escrivá, founder of Opus Dei, wrote a spiritual maxim that fits very well here: “And in a paganised or pagan environment when my life clashes with its surroundings, won’t my naturalness seem artificial?” you ask me.

And I reply: Undoubtedly your life will clash with theirs; and that contrast – faith confirmed by works! – is exactly the naturalness I ask of you” (*The Way*, 380).

<sup>45</sup> EG, 100: “It always pains me greatly to discover how some Christian communities, and even consecrated persons, can tolerate different forms of enmity, division, calumny, defamation, vendetta, jealousy and the desire to impose certain ideas at all costs, even to persecutions which appear as veritable witch hunts. Whom are we going to evangelize if this is the way we act?”

<sup>46</sup> A clarification is needed here: while the official Italian text employs the singular word “realtà” (reality), the English translation of the document uses the word “realities”, which is the one used by the author of the article.

time of Pontius Pilate, resurrected and ascended into heaven. In other words, a real Person, who not only proposes a moral doctrine, but also has given – and gives – his life for men’s salvation. Because of its supernatural origin, the Christian faith offers a comprehensive view of human life that ideologies, which are human constructions, cannot offer in spite of their partial validity or good intentions

The Pope alerts us to the danger that, in our communication and in our actions, “ideas become detached from realities” (EG, 231). There are also various ways of masking reality into which Church communications may fall: “angelic forms of purity” or models impossible to reach; “dictatorships of relativism”<sup>47</sup>; “empty rhetoric”; suggesting “objectives more ideal than real”; “ahistorical fundamentalism” options that blame or exalt past periods that will never come back; “ethical systems bereft of kindness”, which apply the norm without considering the person; or intellectual discourses “bereft of wisdom”, that is, superficial, unrealistic or sophistic (EG, 231).

For Pope Francis, ideas are useful when they are “at the service of communication, understanding, and praxis”. However, when they become disconnected from reality they “give rise to ineffectual forms of idealism and nominalism, capable at most of classifying and defining, but certainly not calling to action” (EG, 232). For Christians, “the principle of reality, of a word already made flesh and constantly striving to take flesh anew, is essential to evangelization” (EG, 233). Based on this principle, Church communicators are invited to propose a coherent testimony of life and not idealistic or theoretical models.

Other guidelines for communications derived from this principle are the following:

- It brings us to value the Church’s life as “a history of salvation, to be mindful of those saints who inculcated the Gospel in the life of our peoples and to reap the fruits of the Church’s rich bimillennial tradition, without pretending to come up with a system of thought detached from this treasury, as if we wanted to reinvent the Gospel” (EG, 233). Sound critical thinking will help Church communicators to recognize mistakes committed by Christians as well as to feel proud of their numerous positive actions<sup>48</sup>. The lives of saints are wonderful communication stories of ideals attached to reality.

The ‘principle of reality’ motivates us to intellectual effort to stay connected to reality, “to put the word into practice, to perform works of justice and charity” (EG, 233). Not doing so would mean “to remain in the realm of pure ideas and to end up in a lifeless and unfruitful self-centredness and gnosticism” (EG, 233).

- The realism inherent to the Christian faith also sheds light into the potentialities and limits of digital communication. Social media has provided astonishing tools and environments to foster community, but may not always be the best channel for evangelization. Much depends on by whom and how are they managed. Being involved in social media, through a Facebook profile, a Twitter or Instagram account, or a YouTube channel, is not a guarantee of an effective evangelization<sup>49</sup>. Already in 2002, John Paul II affirmed that,

<sup>47</sup> Cf. Card. J. Ratzinger, *Homily at Mass «pro eligendo romano pontifice»* (18 April 2005).

<sup>48</sup> Examples of this critical thinking may be recognizing the excess of zeal that brought some to use force in suppressing religious freedom in the Middle Ages or, conversely, defending the task of cultural promotion and well-being of natives in missionary lands.

<sup>49</sup> There are important differences between personal and institutional communication in the digital realm. The first is usually more informal and direct and, if authentic – or perceived as such – facilitates

“Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses. Above all, by providing information and stirring interest it makes possible an initial encounter with the Christian message, especially among the young who increasingly turn to the world of cyberspace as a window on the world. It is important, therefore, that the Christian community think of very practical ways of helping those who first make contact through the Internet to move from the virtual world of cyberspace to the real world of Christian community”<sup>50</sup>.

*The whole is greater than the part (EG, 234–237)*

The “innate tension” between globalization and localization is also present in the Church. She has “to pay attention to the global so as to avoid narrowness and banality”, yet also needs “to look to the local, which keeps our feet on the ground”. Two extremes of that tension are, on the one side, an abstract, empty universalism that follows others’ trends and, on the other, a folkloristic localism which gets satisfied with itself and is unable to see the beauty beyond its borders (EG, 234). The Pope invites us to keep in mind that “the global need not stifle, nor the particular prove barren” and to always remember that “the whole is greater than the part, but it is also greater than the sum of its parts” (EG, 235).

Mass media and in particular social media tend to magnify small disputes and problems. Frequently, many issues related to Church doctrine, morals or discipline are confused with the personal opinions of divulgators, bloggers, youtubers or journalists, who lack a comprehensive picture of Church’s truths. The diversity of audiences and the possible distortion caused by the communication system must not generate a “communicative paralysis”. Church communicators have to take action and consider well the public to whom they direct their message, using the right channels to do so<sup>51</sup>. Understanding the global dimension of today’s media system, they need to be able to explain the truth in each particular context without falling into manipulation because of superficial simplification. They have to be able to present the reality of the parts, keeping alive the relation with the whole<sup>52</sup>.

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persuasion, while the official one is usually less engaging. Cf. S. Tapia, and Daniel ARASA, “La presenza del sacerdote nelle reti sociali” (Capitolo 10), in: G. Ruggeri (a cura di), *Cambiati dalla Rete. Vivere le relazioni al tempo dei social network*, Edizioni Messaggero Padova, Padova 2012, 142–159. Cf. R. Buscemi, *5 consigli a una istituzione della Chiesa che vuole essere presente sui social network*, in: G. Tridente & B. Mastroianni (a cura di), *La missione digitale. Comunicazione della Chiesa e social media*, Rome 2016, 97–108.

<sup>50</sup> John Paul II, *Message for the 36<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day “Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel”* (12 May 2002).

<sup>51</sup> Cf. J.M. La Porte (2014), *Ibidem*.

<sup>52</sup> Paul VI, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesiam suam* (6 August 1964), n. 88: “The desire to come together as brothers must not lead to a watering down or whittling away of truth. Our dialogue must not weaken our attachment to our faith. Our apostolate must not make vague compromises concerning the principles which regulate and govern the profession of the Christian faith both in theory and in practice.

An immoderate desire to make peace and sink differences at all costs (irenism and syncretism) is ultimately nothing more than skepticism about the power and content of the Word of God which we desire to preach. The effective apostle is the man who is completely faithful to Christ’s teaching. He alone can remain unaffected by the errors of the world around him, the man who lives his Christian life to the full”. Cf. also J.M. La Porte (2014), *Ibidem*.

Finally, a Christian outlook always counts on the contribution of all, not just those who think the same: “Even people who can be considered dubious on account of their errors have something to offer which must not be overlooked. [...] It is the sum total of persons within a society which pursues the common good, which truly has a place for everyone” (EG, 236). While respecting others’ identity and freedom, communicators look for collaborative relationships, trying also to avoid wasting resources and energies. The acceptance of the universal over the particular should make them avoid the inflexible position of defending one option, even legitimate, as the only possible. That position runs the risk of a judgmental attitude that looks down on others and even falls into the trickery of trying to define, from a presumptuous “higher” position, the degree of Catholicism of other people or institutions.

### *Identity as a condition for dialogue*

The section on common good and peace in society concludes by affirming that part of the contribution that Church communication may offer for a peaceful society is its capacity for and interest in dialogue at all levels (EG, 238). Catholics are aware that “the Church does not have solutions for every particular issue” (EG, 241) and can learn from others (EG, 247). Nonetheless, they are convinced that faith can enhance reason; thus, “evangelization is attentive to scientific advances and wishes to shed on them the light of faith and the natural law” (EG, 242). At a practical level, professional Church communicators try to be up-to-date on current issues and cultural trends in society. That training will help them to use rational arguments in their communication to others, since faith “seeks and trusts reason” (EG, 242).

The dialogue with people from other religions or even non-believers can be an expression of love for the truth<sup>53</sup>. For Catholic communicators it is clear that convictions and identity are needed for a real dialogue; indeed, says the Pope, there is an “essential bond between dialogue and proclamation“, since “true openness involves remaining steadfast in one’s deepest convictions, clear and joyful in one’s own identity”, while at the same time being “open to understanding those of the other party” (EG, 251).

## 2.6. CHAPTER FIVE: SPIRIT-FILLED EVANGELIZERS

### *Communicating with a renewed spirit*

The last chapter of EG is most directed to the interiority of the person and hence to the formation of the communicator. The Pope uses the expression “spirit-filled evangelizers” which, applied to Church communicators, means professionals “rooted in prayer” and open in their work to the action of the Holy Spirit (EG, 259). Evangelizing is not “a set of tasks dutifully carried out despite one’s own personal

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<sup>53</sup> For the Pope, non-believers who search for truth, goodness and beauty are “precious allies in the commitment to defending human dignity, in building peaceful coexistence between peoples and in protecting creation” (EG, 257).

inclinations and wishes” (EG, 261). It is a free and happy decision to stir up on others an enthusiasm “full of fervour, joy, generosity, courage, boundless love and attraction!” How much Church communication can help in this attractiveness!

Pope Francis insists that evangelizers need to be people of prayer and work (EG, 262). Words move, but example tugs. But that testimony of life only comes up through grace: “Without prolonged moments of adoration, of prayerful encounter with the word, of sincere conversation with the Lord, our work easily becomes meaningless; we lose energy as a result of weariness and difficulties, and our fervour dies out” (EG, 262).

A faithful and supernatural outlook makes us understand that today’s world is not necessarily harder than previous periods but “simply different” (EG, 263). There is no space to follow the models of the medieval or post-medieval *Christianitas*, in a so-called ‘psychology of siege’. A serious realism does not bring about pessimism but an optimism that counts on God’s assistance.

### *Giving sense with gentleness*

The Pope, who recalls the example and model of the first Christians and the saints (EG, 263), insists that “if we succeed in expressing adequately and with beauty the essential content of the Gospel, surely this message will speak to the deepest yearnings of people’s hearts” (EG, 265). The aspiration of Christians for happiness is not different from that of their contemporaries. The duty of Catholics, and Catholic communicators in particular, is offering answers, but “not from a sense of obligation [...] but as the result of a personal decision which brings us joy and gives meaning to our lives” (EG, 269). Reaching others helps us to rethink what the topics are that we discuss in Catholic media: Are they interesting? Appealing? Nevertheless, the problem is not only the issues but the way of communicating them: “We are told to give reasons for our hope, but not as an enemy who critiques and condemns” [...] but “with gentleness and reverence” (*1 Pet 3:15*)” (EG, 271)<sup>54</sup>.

The conviction that a life of faith is the most fulfilling appears clearly in the last paragraphs of EG: “The work of evangelization enriches the mind and the heart; it opens up spiritual horizons; it makes us more and more sensitive to the workings of the Holy Spirit, and it takes us beyond our limited spiritual constructs” (EG, 272). This conviction helps us to ascertain the mysterious working of Christ and the Holy Spirit, even though “often it seems that God does not exist” (EG, 276). Faith is trust that God will help us to “bear good fruit (cf. *Jn 15:5*)” even if “this fruitfulness is often invisible, elusive and unquantifiable” (EG, 279).

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<sup>54</sup> The Year of Mercy was a great lesson in this regard. A very enlightening article on the communication dimension of Pope’s Jubilee, written by A. Ivereigh, will soon be published in: *Church, Communication and Culture*, Vol. 2, Iss. 3, 2017: <http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23753234.2017.1388147>.

### 3. CONCLUSIONS AND LEARNING POINTS

If we had to synthesize the main traits of the communication of the faith in EG, we could name the following:

1) A need for a *simpler* evangelization/communication: with the goal of trying to help the wounded, the presentation of the faith should be more popular. I do not mean in the sense of being simplistic, but in the sense of being less intellectualist –which is to say, less focused on just reaching the reason through complicated formulas; this means also speaking, and indeed mainly, to the heart. This approach has many consequences, such as manifesting the testimony and the example of saints.

2) Communication has to be more centered into the *kerygma*, that is to say, putting at the center of the message the personal encounter with Christ, and leaving aside accidental elements. Faith is not an ideology, a system, and still less is it a cluster of rules, but rather it is the encounter with a Person, Christ, who fulfills all aspirations of the human heart.

3) The advantage of a *prioritized* communication: in other words, not mainly focused on secondary aspects, intra-ecclesial and self-referential issues, or doctrinal orthodoxy questions, but adapted to the challenges of today's people. This characteristic requires a correct freedom of spirit and a sound discernment, understood as an evaluation made in the light of faith.

4) A communication that takes *risk* into account. The Pope leads the way not only through this document, but also in his daily activities. For example, when he meets the most influential players of the digital world, like Mark Zuckerberg (founder and CEO of Facebook), Eric Schmidt (executive chairman of Google) or Tim Cook (CEO of Apple), the Pope is trying to reach those who control and thus condition society's communication, even assuming the real peril of being used by them.

This courageous attitude of assuming risks has, among others, two manifestations:

a) First, that of a “Chiesa in uscita”, a Church which goes forth, which does not expect people to come but goes to reach them.

b) Second, a Church that wants to speak to the youth in the channels and through the language they can understand<sup>55</sup>. The Pope's presence in the social media is a concrete example of this<sup>56</sup>.

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<sup>55</sup> EG, 105: “Young people often fail to find responses to their concerns, needs, problems and hurts in the usual structures” and “we find it hard to listen patiently to them, to appreciate their concerns and demands, and to speak to them in a language they can understand” (EG, 105). Significantly enough, the 15<sup>th</sup> Ordinary Session of the Synod of Bishops, which will take place in October 2018, is dedicated to the theme “Youth, faith and vocational discernment”.

<sup>56</sup> Although Francis is not present on Facebook, he is on Instagram and has more than 30 million followers among its nine different Twitter accounts (Arabic, English, French, German, Italian, Latin, Polish, Portuguese and Spanish); cf. J. Narbona, *Digital leadership, Twitter and Pope Francis*, Church, Communication and Culture, Vol.1, Iss. 1, 2016, 90–109. The phenomenon of YouTubers, which cannot be expanded upon here, is a good example of this vast field of opportunity for reaching the youth. One inspiring example in the YouTube Catholic arena is Fr. Daniel Vázquez Pajuelo, a Spanish Marianist father, who tries to promote the Gospel message with a lively and fresh style: [www.youtube.com/user/smdani](http://www.youtube.com/user/smdani). He is also one of the founders of *iMission*, <http://imision.org>, an initiative to promote evangelization in the Digital Continent.

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## A COMMUNICATION REFLECTION FROM *EVANGELII GAUDIUM*: TEACHINGS FOR CHURCH INSTITUTIONAL COMMUNICATIONS

### Summary

The Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium* is the fruit of Pope Francis' reflection on the 13<sup>th</sup> Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, gathered in October 2012 which discussed the subject "The New Evangelization for the Transmission of the Christian Faith". We analyze the Pope's document from a communication perspective. However, this article will not present the communication theories behind the text, but extract some practical teachings and principles useful for Church communicators. The title of the exhortation, "The Joy of the Gospel", is a perfect synthesis of the Pope's tone

and intention, and brings one naturally to the conclusion that Church communicators play a particular role in the task of evangelization, as sowers of peace and dialogue in the world.

**Key words:** *Evangelii gaudium*, Pope Francis, Church communication, evangelization, communication of the faith, digital culture, media education, peace and dialogue

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