

FORUM

Do the Media Make the Magisterium?

Abstract. — *The following contributions document the panel discussion held at the Leuven Encounters in Systematic Theology X “The Letter and the Spirit: On the Forgotten Documents of Vatican II.” The Second Vatican Council’s decree on the means of social communication Inter Mirifica was no doubt not reckoning with the immense variety of technologies and possibilities that exist today, when addressing the concerns and problems of social communication. Nevertheless, it paved the way for the Church’s awareness of the pastoral importance of its media perception. Even if to date the relationship with the media is not always all roses, the Church and its magisterium have learned to use the possibilities the media provide. One professor of theology, specialized in theological basic research, and two journalists (Vatican Radio and Herder Korrespondenz) reflect together on the relation between the media and the magisterium today.*

About the Possibility that Pope Francis Really Exists

Kurt Appel

Medialized Popes

When the news was announced that John Paul II has died, a spontaneous applause erupted from the crowd (of mostly young people) gathered at St. Peter’s Square. Of course, that reaction was a response to the great personal testimony of that Pope, but at the same time there was also another subtle message conveyed: the applause was *also* to the final act of a great theater piece. John Paul II was the first global theatrical Pope, the first ‘media pope’ of modern times. Symbolism shaped his pontificate and any symbolic gesture was accompanied by the corresponding media images. He was, in the first phase of his pontificate (1978-1990), the symbol against atheistic communism, impressively accompanied by the

images of the (until now unexplained) assassination attempt on his person, which made him in billion fold worldwide publicity a “blood-witness” (martyr) against communism. The second phase (1991-2000) was marked by the testimony of a universal and missionary Church, characterized by the new evangelization, on the foundation of Israel, and symbolized by the prayer at the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. In the third phase, John Paul II was known as the Suffering Servant, symbol of trust in God, human dignity and peace – the most striking image was probably when the Pope could give the last ‘*urbi et orbi*’ blessing only from the window of his apartment because he was so weakened. Wojtyła’s pontificate thus moved along symbols and images. Church policy and political decisions were, therefore, hardly taken note of by the global public.

The separation of reality from media coverage became radicalized in the pontificate of Benedict XVI. The profane history was juxtaposed to a sacral-liturgical-sacerdotal order, which should bring a piece of heaven on earth. Ratzinger wanted to spiritualize (“vergeistigen”) the world, he wanted to illustrate that neither man-made politics nor history have the last word. However, these attempts brought to light the whole new significance, which the media had acquired. Against the papal intention to spiritualize the world the only impression left, for many, was that of a postmodern media presentation (keyword: the papal shoes) and exactly one of the most spiritual pontificates was transformed in its public reception mostly into a ‘Vatican Disneyland’. The reality, in any case, seemed finally replaced by mediality. Perhaps the pedophilia scandal, as it appeared in the Church, weighed so heavily in ecclesiastical circles, just because it interfered with the perfect media presentation, for there was a remnant that could not be medialized. The Church, that was internally as well as in the perception of the world a single media event, has revealed a last remnant of tangibility.

Virtual Realities and Nihilism – the Mirror of 9/11

One of the principal images of the past decades was 9/11, that is, the attack on the World Trade Center in New York. It was not least so ‘impressive’, because in this attack war and murder were presented as media event. One of the most unsettling moments consisted not least in the fact that in this attack a mirror was held to the Western world. Does its essence not consist in the fact that it has indeed completely virtualized the entire world? And is exactly this virtualization not noticeable in a nihilism that destroys everything it encounters? Was the nihilism of 9/11 a kind of echo? (This is not to excuse or relativize the attack, for it remains an absolutely nihilistic act!)

Western culture is committed to a radical individualism. The 'I' must invent itself *'ex nihilo'* under the imperative of absolute self-realization. Everything that confronts it – historical, familial, social, cultural ties, i.e., ultimately the entire social and biological corpus – is hence systematically precluded. Symbols of this development are the *perpetuum mobile*, a totally self-referential apparatus, which knows no 'exteriority', and the new megacities, in which an increasing proportion of the world population resides. These are cities that are mere peripherals, without horizon, without a past and without future (insofar as they are not tied to any political or social visions). The elimination of history and, with it, time (and body) opens a timeless world in an eternal present in which everything can be replaced; in which there is neither the weight of a tradition nor an utopia. The perfect expression of this is the media world, or rather the 'virtual reality'. In it, everything is 'distancable' (i.e. can be kept at a distance from us) and replaceable, in it is realized the old dream of eternal bodiless life. The subjects of the media, as they meet on Facebook, etc., are no longer mortal, they are ghostly 'images'. The subject desired absolute self-realization under capitalism, and hence died as a corporeal and tradition-bound subject in order to resurrect as a virtual brand.

The true echo of the conservative positions, as demonstrated today in Africa, in the Islamic world, but also among the neocons and ideological rights in Europe and America, consists in the refusal to acknowledge this world as it is; in the opinion that the total self-production and realization of the 'I' leads to nothingness. Their major mistake consists in the attempt to immediately fall back into traditions. Hence, they underestimate the media, for the media have long made the immediate recourse to traditions impossible, insofar as these traditions have been transformed into arbitrary interchangeable brands. To illustrate this in view of the 'conservative' Pope Benedict – whether this predicate applies, is not of interest here: In the reception of the present media the vestiges of the liturgical dimension of the world of which this Pope is reminiscent (i.e., in his intended sublimation of our everyday life – a life marked by consumption and/or violence, and not least, a life that should be restored through the conscious return to traditions) are what has been made of the real or supposed red "Prada" shoes...

A Pope Who Could Perhaps Exist

Pope Francis does not escape the media. That would be impossible, since there is no more reality outside the media. He, too, is a Pope of the 'images'; of the images and symbols – the Pope of Mercy, the pastor in

the global village, who wants to comfort the stray sheep all over the world. However, – and this is perhaps the most interesting thing – there are a few moments, by means of which the Pope deliberately tries to shield his pontificate from a pure medialization. The Pope placed the vulnerability at the center of his considerations, that is, precisely that phenomenon, which has been suppressed by the medialization. Images are not vulnerable; where there is no past and no future, where everything is exchangeable, there is no vulnerability. The fragile, the delicate, the vulnerable eludes a complete transmission in images. The pope knows this and he responds to this fact by trying to remove his person from the center. His efforts at collegiality, his speeches against clericalism etc. represent not a mere ‘democratization’, but rather indicate the awareness that the Christian message can only be received, if it becomes incarnated in the last ‘most peripheral’ believers. Therefore, if people today, inspired by the Pope and by the gospel, begin to be a little more merciful to others, if they take into account the others’ vulnerability, then they give an indication that the Pope could really exist; that there is still a small piece of reality that does not become assimilated in medialization; that not everything is crafted by the media...

The Media and the Pope from a Vatican Point of View

Philippa Hitchen

Listening in to your discussions as an outsider – both as an Anglican among Catholics and as a journalist amongst learned professors and theologians – it has been clear that the focus of almost all the discussions about ‘*The Letter and the Spirit of Vatican II*’ has been about relationships. The issues of 50 years ago at the Council, like the issues facing the Church today, revolve around the relationship of the Church with the modern world, the relationship of God to his people and the relationships of each one of us to those around us. Cardinal Tagle explored the differences between a pastoral and a doctrinal Council, stressing that being pastoral is not an activity, but it is about who you are and what relationships you make. “... Revelation is a God who dialogues, a God who speaks and listens and invites us to a living relationship, a conversation...”

In any conversation, the choice of words and the expressions you use are vitally important. We have heard at the conference some interesting analysis of the struggles over different words that were used in the Vatican II documents, just as at the last two Synods on the family I have heard a lot of wrangling over words to be used in the halfway and final documents. A lot of the bishops I speak to now insist on the need for the Church to come up with a new language which does not condemn and exclude, but which offers inclusion and welcome for people in whatever different situations they may be experiencing.

Vatican II changed the language of Church liturgy from Latin to the vernacular, though official documents and speeches – including those of the synods and conclaves – remained in Latin. Significantly, Pope Francis has changed that, so that bishops attending such meetings can have greater accessibility, with translations into a language they perfectly understand. Italian now remains the working language of the Church, rather than English, with all its colonial implications for many in the developing world.

Increasing accessibility also means, to some extent, relinquishing control of the conversation and aiming for a dialogue between equals – a far cry from the tone of *Inter Mirifica* which is so very cautious and urges the hierarchy to ‘watch over’ the media and to ‘instruct and guide the faithful’ (*IM* 20-21). There were a number of journalists during the Council who hosted the bishops and *periti* at relaxed gatherings in their homes; so I think it would be the subject of some interesting research to explore what influence – if any – was exerted through these informal meetings.

Responding to Professor Appel’s remarks about ‘Medialized Popes’ since the Council, I fully agree with him that a key feature of John Paul II’s pontificate was his understanding of the media and his ability to model himself as the “first ‘media pope’ of modern times.” His long time press officer, Joaquin Navarro-Valls, who successfully dragged the Holy See’s media machine into the 20th century, was Wojtyła’s able ally in exploiting the power of image and gesture to carry the Pope’s message to places and people that would never set eyes on any papal speech or copy of the catechism. I also agree entirely with the analysis of the three phases of that long pontificate – combatting communism, new evangelization and suffering servant.

Regarding the pontificate of Pope Benedict however, I have a different view of the separation of reality from media coverage, as Professor Appel describes it. I agree that Ratzinger, the retiring university teacher turned reluctant pontiff, sought to “spiritualize the world,” a concept

with which most media outlets were quite unable to connect. But I suggest that it is precisely the German Pope's own detachment from the daily reality of ordinary folk that led to an increasing gulf between his message and the media portrayal of it.

In a very physical sense, Pope Francis' decision to move into a room in the Santa Marta guesthouse, with its communal dining room, throws sharply into focus the plight of his predecessor, who increasingly appeared as a virtual prisoner in the Apostolic Palace, with access mainly to those guests and sources of information that his closest aides wished him to receive. Prior to his election, Cardinal Ratzinger had spent almost a quarter of a century in the Roman Curia, and we know from Francis' famous Christmas speech (about the 15 spiritual diseases of the Curia) what an unhealthy place that can sometimes be. Before his move to Rome, Ratzinger did spend five years as Archbishop of Munich and Freising – a move described as an unusual promotion for someone with such little pastoral experience. But even in his earliest years, according to biographies such as David Gibson's *The Rule of Benedict: Pope Benedict XVI and His Battle with the Modern World*, his upbringing in a traditional Bavarian family, with an elderly, police officer father "of perhaps excessive strictness," did little to foster relaxed inter-personal relationships – in contrast to Jorge Bergoglio, who speaks often about the positive influence of his extended family on his early years.

In my view the media focus on Ratzinger's famous red shoes reflected the Pope's own emphasis on traditional (and expensive) liturgical vestments which were increasingly seen as excessive and out of touch with the problems of ordinary people struggling with fallout from the global economic recession. The sex abuse crisis, rather than a provocation by anti-Catholic journalists – as some Church leaders persistently repeated – was the sadly predictable response to an out-of-touch institution blindly ignoring and seeking to cover-up the crimes being perpetrated against children in its care. The deepening Vatileaks scandal was not a media invention, but rather an inevitable outcome of the political power struggles that surfaced during the last phase of John Paul's pontificate and played themselves out in the years leading up to Benedict's dramatic resignation. Ironically, the most successful media image of that whole pontificate was the CTV (Centro Televisivo Vaticano) choreography – by Msgr. Dario Viganò, the new head of the Secretariat for Communications – of the elderly, solitary, man in white, in a helicopter circling the dome of St Peter's and flying across ancient Rome into the sunset towards Castel Gandolfo.

Looking more broadly at the so-called 'conservative' position in the Church, Professor Appel says the main mistake of its proponents is to

fall back on traditions and refuse to acknowledge this world as it is. We have seen this playing out very clearly in the two Synods on the family, with deep fault lines developing between those who see their task as upholding the timeless truths of the Church and those who question the relevance of a Church that is unable to connect and respond to the realities of peoples' lives. From questions of the widespread use of artificial birth control, to second marriages, to gay partnerships, the more traditionalist minded bishops seem fearful that any acknowledgment or discussion of such 'irregular situations' can be interpreted as recognition or approval of them. Other, more 'progressive' leaders, along with the religious or lay men and women participants, have voiced great concern that such fears are not only ignoring reality but are harking back to an ideal (or virtual) 'golden era' of the family that has never actually existed. While the media are regularly accused of emphasizing divisions, there is no doubt (as the 'hermeneutics of conspiracy' theorists have shown) that the Synods have been as much about how to hold together a more open, honest and collegial Catholic Church (all part of the Francis reform programme) as they have been about the mission and vocation of the family today.

Pope Francis – the Pope of Mercy: After a decade and a half of damage control for Vatican communications to contend with, Francis seems to have an almost magical relationship with the media – some of whom have dubbed him the 'Teflon pope'. I think there are many reasons for this, including, as Kurt Appel says, his focus on the poor and vulnerable peripheries, in all senses of the word. Likewise, his Curial reforms, anti-clericalism and efforts at collegiality are very attractive, not just because of an easy media narrative, but because they genuinely reflect what so many people see as a return to the essence of the Christian message. That's not to say that the shrewd Jesuit pope underestimates the importance of the media: significantly, it was in his meeting with the media just after his election that he spoke clearly about the priorities of his pontificate – the Franciscan values of poverty, peace and care of creation – with special emphasis on creating a 'poor church for the poor'. But his words are not media spin, rather they are a clear vision of what matters to those in the pews who will no longer accept princes of the Church living in luxurious palaces while preaching about poverty, chastity and obedience. As much as what he says, it is the authenticity and 'normalness' of what Cardinal Bergoglio did and what Pope Francis does in sharing the 'joys and sorrows, hopes and anxieties' of people from all walks of life that make it cool to be Catholic again.

In view of Bergoglio's revolution of normalness, it is interesting to look back at Ratzinger's last speech to the clergy of the Rome diocese

where he states that “the virtual (Second Vatican) Council was stronger than the real Council.”¹ He accuses the media of translating or trivializing the sacred spirit of the Council, detaching it from its “proper key”² of faith. But as Francis has shown, is not the Christian message most effective precisely when Church leaders are able to translate – incarnate – the faith into the messy, profane realities, yes even the trivia, of ordinary peoples’ lives? I think the media still have a lot to teach the leaders of our Churches today.

The Media and the Magisterium – a Precarious Relationship?

Ulrich Ruh

With the Decree *Inter Mirifica*, adopted on 4 December 1963, the Second Vatican Council entered new territory when for the first time a council was concerned with the subject of social means of communications. The question had never been raised in this form at previous church gatherings. After all, the media landscape, which has now become natural, has gradually evolved in its constituent elements only in the course of social and technical modernity. Think of the print media on the one hand, radio, film and television on the other. The Second Vatican Council was not only a ‘pastoral Council’ and a Council of the world church from all continents, but also a Council of the media age. It was closely followed and commented on by the media that were available at the time.

The Second Vatican Council was a pronounced *kairos* for the relationship between the official Catholic Church and the media. The Council quickly developed a dynamic that could not have been foreseen and, in important areas, achieved breakthroughs that wanted to change the face of the Church and then actually did change it: in relation to the other Christian churches as well as to the non-Christian religions, to the ecclesiastical basic functions (liturgy) as well as with a view to the various

1. Pope Benedict XVI, *Meeting with the Parish Priests and the Clergy of Rome*, 14 February 2013, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2013/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20130214_clero-roma.html (accessed 20/04/2017).

2. Ibid.

actors of ecclesiastical life (bishops, priests, the religious, lay Christians), not least in relation to the modern world as a whole. The media followed these tense developments with interest, respect and amazement. The Church of the Council has throughout had a positive media image. At that time, there was quite a number of journalists with Catholic socialization, obvious church affiliation and proven competence in ecclesiastical-theological questions, both in the general as well as in the special ecclesiastical or rather church-related media. At the time of the Council for example, there existed a network of Catholic journals across Europe, for which the coverage of the Second Vatican Council was a special concern. Among these journals was also the German *Herder Korrespondenz*.

In the meantime, the media world has changed in some ways. The weights in the media landscape have shifted to the disadvantage of the print media. The internet offers unlimited communication possibilities, social networks are used by a great number of people. At the same time, media are now operating in a different socio-cultural environment from that at the time of the Council. On the one hand, this environment is characterized by religious pluralization, especially by a stronger presence of Islam in many European countries, on the other by an advanced secularization, the most important characteristics of which are a weakening of the Christian tradition as well as a loosening of the church affiliation. Even among media professionals, familiarity with religious accomplishments and institutions is the exception and not the rule. The public for continuous information on the Church and Christianity has shrunk in most European countries. In the public attention the subject of religion is rather occupied by Islam and the difficulties with its integration into the secularized European societies.

However, after the Council, the Catholic Church remained a 'papal church' or 'bishops' church', which is still reflected in the media's dealings with it. It has a leadership personality worldwide as its 'face'. Accordingly, the media interest concentrates on the papal office and its respective occupants. This could be shown in the Council's Popes John XXIII and Paul VI as well as the long and, in many respects, spectacular pontificate of John Paul II, in the 'theologian Pope' Benedict XVI as well as in his successor from the 'end of the world' with his in some respects revolutionary style. On a national level, e.g. in Germany, the media interest in the Catholic Church is most closely connected with bishops: They are singled out by the hierarchical structure of the Church and therefore have the best chance of media resonance in the positive as well as in the negative sense; in any case a far better chance than by church lay representatives or relevant bodies as, for example,

the traditional Central Committee of German Catholics. The media do not “make” the teaching office in this respect, but adapt themselves to the official Catholic Church structure and, so to speak, fall for its line.

At the same time, they can also drive the official, hierarchically composed Catholic Church ahead of them and influence its agenda. This has been shown not least in the detection of cases of sexual abuse of children and adolescents by priests and religious in various European countries. In Germany, the Church did not really react until it had been under the pressure of the media, after it had often attempted for a long time to cover the matter up. The same is true in the case of the now resigned bishop of the German diocese of Limburg, Franz-Peter Tebartz van Elst, who stumbled over his generous and self-asserting dealings with ecclesiastical funds and corresponding cover-up efforts. Indirectly, the media have prompted the leadership of the Catholic Church in Germany to carry out a cross-diocesan dialogue process in response to the deep credibility crisis. However, this then found far less media attention than the previous abuse crisis and remained a purely inner-church process without any noticeable public response.

Many responsible in the Catholic Church are still very uneasy with the media. Often they fall into lachrymose or massively undue media scolding and see the Church primarily as a victim of campaigns, instead of realizing that the Church has a debt to the media, ultimately for its own religious and social message. The popular pattern of church representatives is too simply knit, if it just holds that the Church is concerned with ultimate and deepest truths, the media, on the other hand, one-sidedly focus on sensations and mis-developments, and on this scale also assess the behaviour of the Church. In reality, the truth is neither a fixed sinecure for the magisterium of the Church nor for the media.

The Church carries its message, to speak with Paul, “in earthen vessels” (2 Cor 4:7). It must always rethink and re-appropriate it whereby in this process both the magisterium as well as the theology and the sense of faith of God’s people have their irreplaceable task. On the other hand, the media are concerned with truth as a matter of fact: they strive to reveal the real problems and conflicts, thereby contributing to the formation of opinions; they accompany critical political action, social and cultural developments and economic processes. The difference is that the media are aware of the difficulties of getting to the truth, even if that is sometimes hidden in the everyday business. The Catholic Church, on the other hand, still finds it hard to deal with its doctrinal tenets, tends to immunize them against critical demand and to play down fractions in the tradition.

In this context, church leaders need to have a strong interest in that there are independent, serious and substantial media. They are also doing well to make a contribution to keeping the media in this track if possible, even if their engagement can only have a limited impact. Here, for example, the Institute for Promoting Young Journalists³ needs to be mentioned, which is supported by the German Bishops' Conference and offers a journalistic training recognized by professional circles. It is crucial for the Church that, in the various media sectors, under the present circumstances there are journalists who are sensitive to religious and ecclesiastical issues and who have the relevant competence, be they themselves believing Christians or not. The Church should also maintain contacts with relevant journalists, not to 'watch over' them, but to get a sense of the challenges these media-makers are facing today, especially in the coverage of themes like religion and the Church. This can lead to greater realism in dealing with the media.

The expansion of the Church's own ecclesiastical media offers or the Church's public relations is fundamentally legitimate and can be quite helpful. The Church is faced with an obligation of providing information both for the core of its members and for those who only sporadically participate in the life of the Church. It must not rely on the general media to report continuously and thoroughly on its activities. However, as is often the case, ecclesiastical public relations must not become an advertising event or be content with pious harmlessness. A general mistrust of the Church's own journalism would certainly be unjust. Yet it cannot be denied that financial dependencies and human entanglements in church-owned media favour unreasonable considerateness and inhibitions to retaliate concerning delicate points. Thus, a special ecclesiastical variant of the widely spread complaisance journalism is easily created. However, church media and those who work for them as journalists are taken seriously in the media landscape only if they demonstrate by their work that their competence and their willingness to make critical enquiries are not to be replaced by misunderstood loyalty.

Fifty years after the Second Vatican Council and its statements on the social means of communication, a realistic and honest self-assessment of the Catholic Church and its magisterium is needed as well as an equally realistic and honest view of the Church on the media in their diversity, their functional conditions and problems. This is an indispensable prerequisite for the fact that, in today's societies, a rational and

3. Institut zur Förderung des publizistischen Nachwuchses in Munich, see <http://www.journalistenschule-ifp.de/>.

sensitive discourse about religion and religious institutions is established, in which the Church should participate constructively with its tradition and its specific perspective. Such a discourse of religion on the basis of a culturally pluralist society and a democratic constitutional state requires a high degree of competence and judgment from all parties involved, as well as a willingness to compromise when negotiating problem solutions, especially in cases of conflict. There is the need of a path between a universally well-tolerated civil religion, which is compatible with all and everything, on the one hand, and a fundamentalist hardening of religion on the other. This discourse is in no way possible without the help of the media.

Applied to the Church: the media today cannot replace the magisterium and should also not claim a magisterial function. Yet the magisterium can learn a lot from the media in the present socio-cultural situation, not only with regard to the transmission and adaptation of the Christian message, but also concerning the fundamental question of how the truth of faith can be brought to light in the tension between tradition and innovation.

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