

Church and Social Communication 40 years of *Inter Mirifica* and beyond

Franz-Josef Eilers, svd

The decree on Social Communication *Inter Mirifica* was one of the very first two documents promulgated by the Second Vatican Council on December 4, 1963; the other being *Sacrosantum Concilium* on Liturgy. After a long discussion on liturgical matters the Council Fathers turned to the proposed Schema on Social Communication, a document with some 114 paragraphs. Actually at the beginning of Council preparations after Pope John XXIII's announcement in June 1959 such a document was not foreseen. Only in the course of deliberations, especially on the "modern means of the apostolate" and the erection of a special commission through the *Motu Proprio Superno Dei Nutu*, that a proposal to draft a document for discussion was made.

The draft document of *Inter Mirifica* in the hands of the Council Fathers had an introduction (nos. 1-5), then a first part on the doctrine of the Church (6-33) with subdivisions on the rights and obligations of the Church, moral norms to be followed and the obligations of the individual and the state. A second section dealt with the apostolate of the Church in this field (34-48) and a third part on the discipline and the ecclesiastical order (49-63). In its fourth section the document considered the different means of communication individually (64-105) like the Press (49-63), film (84-94), Radio and TV (95-105) and other means of Social Communication (106-111). The following conclusion (112-114) is basically contained in the present *Inter Mirifica* document. ⁽¹⁾

This proposal was discussed only for a little more than three sessions within the Council Hall from November 23 to 27, 1962 with all together some 43 interventions. One was a written intervention by then Auxiliary Bishop Karol Wojtyła, later Pope John Paul II, who proposed to also consider the importance of culture for communication. This was a concern he later as pope developed further in establishing a Pontifical Council of Culture at the Vatican.

The discussion on the document ⁽²⁾ revealed not only quite a diversity of opinions but also a level of understanding of Social Communication which can not always be called professional. The concern of the bishops was pastoral and quite some of them felt not being sufficiently prepared and qualified at that time for an extensive document on the subject. Since the proposal was handled at the beginning of the Council, further theological perspectives which surfaced in later Council documents like *Dei Verbum* or *Gaudium et Spes* could not be incorporated yet. Thus, it is understandable that the presidency of the Council proposed to accept the document in principle but to reduce it to the essentials, and asked for a more extensive pastoral instruction to be published at a later stage. ⁽³⁾ Thus, the final version of *Inter Mirifica* has 24 paragraphs only. The decree, however, got with 503 the highest number of "No" votes in the whole Vatican Council. Between this decision on November 27, 1962 and the final promulgation on December 4, 1963 there were a growing number of voices proposing to retract or rewrite the document. This developed so far that some Council

Fathers distributed leaflets against *Inter Mirifica* in the proposed form at the steps of St. Peter Cathedral where the Council sessions took place. Many professionals in Communications felt that the proposed text would not be up to the standard of an Ecumenical Council and the reality of modern communications despite the Council Fathers having approved the first text already in principle and judged it as being “worth a council teaching.”⁽⁴⁾ Beside the reduction to 24 paragraphs the document was also reduced in its ranks from a constitution to a decree.

More than 40 years after the final promulgation by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963 one might see *Inter Mirifica* in a different light. One has to admit that the Council Fathers in their decision to reduce the document to its essentials but at the same time asking for a more extensive pastoral instruction to be worked out by professionals was a wise move. This pastoral instruction “with the help of experts from various countries” was published as *Communio et Progressio* on May 23, 1971 in order to “ensure that all the principles and rules of the Council on the means of Social Communication be put into effect” (*Inter Mirifica*, 23). This instruction which was endorsed and approved by Pope Paul VI therefore must be considered as integral and interpretative part of the Council Decree.⁽⁵⁾

The decree itself sees the use of the modern means of communication as being already included in the teachings of Jesus Christ to share the faith with all the world (Mt. 28, 18). From here the decree states that it is the birthright of the Church to use and own these means of communication for her pastoral activities. Such a stand has consequences for all pastors as well as lay members of the Church (*IM*, 3). From such a conviction flows the need to keep and develop the moral order within which the media are to operate and used according to the circumstances but also the conscience of those involved (*IM*, 4-5). The right to information as a moral right and part of human dignity is confirmed; art and moral law as well as the presentation of evil are addressed (*IM*, 6-7). The role of Public opinion is underlined, but also the responsibilities of recipients, communicators and civil authorities are mentioned (*IM*, 9-12).

After such basic considerations the decree goes to Church activities in the field of Social Communication (*IM*, 13-14) challenging the different members of the Church like pastors, priests, religious and laity, especially stressing their need for professional training and formation (*IM*, 15-16). This is followed by demands for establishing structures and offices for communication and the celebration of World Communication Day.

The Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio* is quite different in its approach to communication as a pastoral obligation of the Church. It does not start with the right and obligation of the Church but rather considers first in the long section the “contribution of communication means to human progress” (Nos. 18-100) before the “commitment of Catholics” is presented (Nos. 101-180).

What now are the special merits of *Inter Mirifica* after 40 years and what still has to be done?

Despite the negative comments during and after the Council the short *Inter Mirifica* decree triggered several developments and also clarifications in the understanding and subsequent handling of Social Communication. These positive developments are mainly structural and can be summarized in the following points:

1. It is the first time in Church history that an *ecumenical council* treated and discussed Social Communication as a special Christian concern and declared it a concern worth treatment at an ecumenical council.
2. It is *Inter Mirifica* and the Council which introduced the expression *Social Communication*. By now, the expression is accepted even by non-Church related institutions. With this, a fixation on only or mainly Mass Media is overcome and the ground was prepared for a broader understanding of communication as a happening and expression of human society in general. Social Communication includes all forms and ways of communicating in human society from traditional forms like storytelling, rumor, drama, dance and music to the Internet and cyberspace. ⁽⁶⁾
3. *Inter Mirifica* clarifies and develops a permanent structure and line of responsibility for social communication within the Catholic Church:
 - The Vatican office on Press and Film is to be extended for all means of communication (*IM, 19*). This was done already five months after the promulgation of the decree on April 2, 1964 through the *Motu Proprio In Fructibus Multis*. The office was also responsible for the elaboration of the Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*. In 1988, the office was elevated to a Pontifical Council.
 - Already, Pope Pius XI's encyclical *Vigilanti Cura* (1936) called for national film offices which, through *Inter Mirifica*, were extended to cover all media. The offices were also made part of a permanent structure for the whole Church: "This Council therefore decides and ordains that national offices for the Press, Cinema, Radio and Television be established everywhere and be properly supported" (*IM, 21*). Together with this goes the establishment of an Episcopal Commission for Social Communication in every bishops' conference.
 - The full responsibility for social communication of every bishop in his diocese is clarified as being responsible "to oversee activities and projects of this sort in their own dioceses, to promote and regulate them including those under the control of exempt religious" (*IM, 20*).
 - On the international level, the different national offices are to cooperate with other offices and also with international Catholic media organizations (*IM, 22*).
4. Another legacy of *Inter Mirifica* is the establishment of a *World Day of Social Communication*. It is in fact the only special day set aside for a special celebration by the Second Vatican Council. On this day, the Council Fathers say the "faithful will be reminded of their duties." They are asked "to pray for the success of the Church's

apostolate in this field and to contribute towards it” (*IM*, 18). Every year a special theme is studied and considered. Since its first celebration in 1967 the Pope issues a special annual message for the occasion. Over the years, this has led to quite a rich and impressive body of Pontifical teachings and reflections on different aspects of Social Communication from different groups of recipients like youth and family to Internet and computers. ⁽⁷⁾

5. A special emphasis is given by *Inter Mirifica* (15, 16) to the need for training and formation: “Priests, religious and laity should be trained *at once*” it says. For this beside others training and learning institutions in the field of Social Communication should be developed and there should be a special attempt to promote Media Education (critical use of media) for consumers of modern media to be able to “use the media properly.” From all *Inter Mirifica*’s demands and proposals this one is repeated in succeeding documents over and over again, e.g. *Communio et Progressio* (107, 111) and *Aetatis Novae* (18, 19). Still it has not been followed and executed enough. Whereas structures are somehow in place in most parts of the world the aspect of systematic training and formation still needs to be developed in a much more responsible way.

Evaluation

Writing on 20 years after *Inter Mirifica* one of the authors of the draft, Fr. Enrico Baragli, sj, laments the lack of practical pastoral application of the document. According to him, the texts approved by the Council have become to quite an extent “dead letters.” He said the need and call for proper formation is still not responded to. This results in the inability to bring the communication dimension into all the different pastoral activities of the Church. In Italy for example, he notes that there are still big amounts of money invested in buildings like churches and other institutions instead of similar investments into communication activities. ⁽⁸⁾ “Will things go better in the next 20 years after *Inter Mirifica*?” he asks and hopes for the best.

Similar things could be said after 40 years of *Inter Mirifica*. One has to admit, however, that the document somehow moved the importance and need for social communication in and of the Church from a ‘marginal’ position into a greater consciousness in general. This is further developed through additional documents like the Pastoral instructions *Communio et Progressio* (1971) and *Aetatis Novae* (1992) and other documents of the Pontifical Council for Social Communication e.g. on Ecumenical and Interreligious Cooperation (1989), Pornography and Violence (1989), Ethics in Communication (2000), Advertising (1997), Internet (2002) and the pastoral use of the Internet (2002). It is also reflected in Apostolic Exhortations after the different Synods of Bishops, where there is almost always a special section on the topic in these final documents. ⁽⁹⁾

In fact there is no scarcity of documents, proposals and admonitions up to John Paul II’s last Apostolic Letter *Il Rapido Sviluppo* (January 24, 2005) which was devoted to social communication. It is rather the integration and systematic development and implementation of these proposals which is still missing. There are many single initiatives, but only a few are joint and systematic efforts for a real integration especially if one looks at the need to go

beyond an ‘instrumental’ approach seeing the media only as instruments. But somehow these efforts still overlook social and spiritual conditions and the real needs of the recipients. Real communication starts with people and their cultures to see how they perceive and deal with each other and also how such a communication determines the positive or negative climate within and between human societies and individuals. Any pastoral plan, which is promoted e.g. in the Pastoral Instruction *Aetatis Novae* (nos. 20-33) should be based on this.

Following *Inter Mirifica* as one of the first documents of the Second Vatican Council the last document *Gaudium et Spes* on the Church in the Modern World approaches Social Communication more from the perspective of human society, culture and new technical developments. This last document which was published exactly two years after *Inter Mirifica* sees Mass Media “contributing to the spread of knowledge and the speedy diffusion far and wide of habits of thought and feeling, setting off chain reactions in their wake” (No. 6). Modern also contribute, according to *Gaudium and Spes* to “one of the most striking features of today’s world” which is “the intense development of interpersonal relationships due in no small measure to modern technical advances...”(No. 23). It is in a special way the chapter on Culture in the document which underlines a positive way of modern communication: “Heightened media exchange between nations and different branches of society open up the riches of different cultures to each and every individual, with the result that a more universal form of culture is gradually taking shape, and through it the unity of mankind is being fostered and expressed in the measure that the particular characteristic of each culture are preserved.”(No. 54) In a quite optimistic mood is further is said that “there are nowadays many opportunities favorable to the development of a universal culture, thanks especially to the boom in book publication and new techniques of cultural and social communication”(No.61).

Some 40 years later such a view of *Gaudium and Spes* might be too optimistic for some. But it is also from this background, that Pope John Paul II develops in *Redemptoris Missio* (1990, 37c) his understanding of a ‘new culture’ which in reality leads to a *paradigm shift*. In calling the world of Communication the “first *areopagus* (marketplace) of the modern age” he not only affirms that “the means of communication have become so important as to be for many the chief means of information and education, of guidance and inspiration in their behavior as individuals, families and within society at large.” He also admits that “to some degree perhaps this ‘aeropagus’ has been neglected.” He affirms, however, that the media are “not meant to merely strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. He says that “there is a deeper reality involved here: since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the *new culture* created by modern communications.” The Pope admits, that “this is a complex issue, since the *new culture* originates not just from whatever content is eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology.” These considerations are often repeated in other documents in the years after 1990.

There is no word any more about *Inter Mirifica*’s “birthright” to own and use these media and a moral obligation but there are rather new challenging perspectives which are based on a cultural perspective:

- 1) The world of social communication is the *first* marketplace (Like the Greek “Aeropagus”) of our time. This statement is complemented in the World Communication Day Message 2002 (No. 2) in referring to the “Forum Romanum”, a “public space where politics and business were transacted, where religious duties were fulfilled, where much of the city’s social life took place, and where the best and the worst of human nature was on display.
- 2) It is from such a new social communication ‘culture’ where people, especially the young, get their values and directions in life. The World Communication Day message 2000 further sees the advent of information society as “a real cultural revolution” (9) which forms peoples “understanding of the meaning of life”.
- 3) We live in a *New Culture* determined by the media. The Church has neglected this, the Pope admits. “Generally, preference has been given to other means of preaching the Gospel and of Christian education, while the mass media are left to the initiative of individuals or small groups and enter into pastoral planning only in a secondary way.” (*Redemptoris Missio*, 37c).
- 4) This *New Culture* “created by modern communications” originates from the fact that there exist -
 - New ways of communicating, with
 - New languages
 - New techniques, and a
 - New psychology.

The consequences of this *New Culture*, however, have not yet been sufficiently determined and studied under the perspective of Church today. In his last Apostolic Letter *Il Rapido Sviluppo* (2005), Pope John Paul II does not take this matter up in more detail nor gives any new directions. The document repeats many things from the past but rightfully underlines stronger than ever the need for a deeper communication spirituality based on the life and example of Jesus Christ himself.

After 40 years, *Inter Mirifica* is still far from being fully implemented. Despite negative feelings in the beginning and limited expectations at the proclamation in 1963 the decree remains a more solid base for action and structure. It demands further efforts, especially in the fields of formation, considering the communication dimension in *all* pastoral and missionary activities and as an integral part of Christian life, proclamation and theology. The challenge of today’s *New Culture* goes beyond the expectations of the Council Fathers and demands new and deeper efforts not only to master the modern times but also to see the challenges for a new way of being Church in a modern communication society.

Footnotes

- (1) On the history, discussion and documentation see: *Enrico Baragli, sj*: L’*Inter Mirifica*, Introduzione, storia, discussione, commento, documentazione. Collana Magisterium 2. Roma 1969; Further *Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*: Church and Social Communication. Basic Documents. 2nd Edition. Manila (Logos) 1997.

- (2) cf. *Acta Synodalia Sacrosancti Concilii Oecumenici Vaticani II*. Vol. 1, Pars III. Congregationes Generales XIX-XXX. Vatican 1971, pp. 373-609.
- (3) *ibid.* p. 613.
- (4) cf. *Ralph M. Wiltgen*: The Rhine flows into the Tiber. A History of Vatican II. Rockford (Tan Publishers) 1985. pp.130-136.
- (5) cf. *Enrico Baragli, sj*: L 'Inter Mirifica' vent' anni dopo. In: *Ecclesia Mater* Roma. Vol. XXI, No.1 1983 pp.51-55; *Helmuth Rolfes*: Gibt es eine kirchenamtliche Lehre der Sozialen Kommunikation? Ein Rueckblick 40 Jahre nach „Inter Mirifica“. In: *Communicatio Socialis* (Mainz)Vol. 37, 2004 p.219-244.
- (6) cf. *Franz-Josef Eilers*: Social Communication: The Development of a Concept. Appendix A In: *Franz-Josef Eilers*: Communicating in Community. An Introduction to Social Communication. 3rd Edition Manila (Logos) 2002. pp 311- 318).
- (7) All messages for World Communication Day since 1967 are documented in *Franz-Josef Eilers, svd*: Church and Social Communication. Basic Documents. 2nd Ed. Manila (Logos) 1997 and in the respective Supplement under the same Title 2002.
- (8) L'Inter Mirifica vent'anni dopo ..*ibid.* p.54.
- (9) *Eilers* 2002 (Supplement 1), p. 80.

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