



Apostles for Today

Prayer and Reflection - August 2013

The Communication of Faith in a Mass-Media Society

Saint Vincent Pallotti was a talented communicator and a man of multiple relationships. His letters bear witness to his numerous contacts. He made use of printed materials to spread his pastoral and apostolic initiatives. However, as a confessor and spiritual director, he was able to listen with great sensitivity to peoples' sufferings and anxieties. We know that he also had the education of missionaries and apostles in the field of communication skills at heart.

In the "Rule" called "Copia Lambruschini" (the Lambruschini Copy) he wrote: "All will learn the language of the area in which they live, without neglecting the culture of their own language, which will be very useful in the place itself or for the works for the glory of God or the spiritual benefit of one's neighbour" (OCCC VII, p. 162).

This suggestion of Pallotti is not only care for the teaching of foreign languages. It can be understood as a concern to understand the mentality and language used by modern human beings. We know that at times in the modern world the language we use for speaking about God and faith is difficult for many people to understand. In his recommendations for those conducting popular missions Pallotti encouraged them to seek "from the most dedicated workers among the clergy... to gather with great and edifying attention all of the information about the people regarding their customs and all of their spiritual needs". This knowledge gathered must be used "for preaching", in such a way that they can "guide... consciences... aptly" (OCCC VII, p. 215).

These indications of Pallotti have retained their relevance. In one of my classes with theology students I asked if anyone knew of a case of conversion as a result of looking at online content. There was

silence. One student timidly mentioned that a friend had come across a video on YouTube and became interested in the question of miraculous healings. It was the only reply to the question about conversion.

Then I asked who knew of any story where the internet had caused harm or damage to someone. At this point the room seemed to be a sea of hands. Nearly everyone has a story to tell about an event in which a surfer has suffered material or spiritual damage through use of the internet.

The meeting with theology students clearly shows that this is our stereotypical association and evaluation regarding the internet and the new technologies connected with it. At first glance, the internet seems to be a breeding ground for superficial entertainment and vulgar content, which thrive on the dark side of our human nature.

The conversation with the theology students, however, continued further. I asked them to describe the different ways of using the internet to increase the life of faith. Then it was discovered that many of them have sent emails to their friends asking for prayer, have searched for websites with information on the life of their communities and for texts of papal talks. They have been able to enjoy listening to Christian music and internet radio. Many liturgical encounters, homilies and talks are also available for those who have need of such content.

The discussion described with the theology students on the role of new media in strengthening and sharing of faith is a good example, expressing several important truths and principles. It is true that direct conversions before the computer screen with mouse in hand are rare. The internet is no substitute for direct face-to-face encounters. It is no substitute for concrete help, for giving a glass of water or for time spent at a sick person's bedside.

On the other hand, internet tools can be extremely useful in supplying information on the life of the Christian community, in maintaining relationships within the community and in finding spiritual content.

Disciples and apostles of Jesus are invited to share their faith. This

is the essence of every evangelisation, old or new. Sharing our faith is also done using new means of communication. Our websites, emails sent, information on Facebook, the sending of text messages or the use of apps on mobile phones - all of this can be an instrument which helps us to strengthen our faith and hope or to share them with others. On the other hand, the same media and media content can contribute to the weakening of faith and to the loss of trust in God and in his Church.

These assertions are the starting point for further reflection. It involves finding criteria to distinguish when the means of communication are leading to a deepening of faith and of ecclesial communities, and when they become an instrument for weakening and blurring its edges.

To respond to these questions what is needed above all is a deeper reflection on the nature of faith. Faith is a gift that comes from God. Voluntary acceptance of this gift is the response of the human person. But "[f]aith is not a mere intellectual assent of the human person to specific truths about God; it is an act with which I entrust myself freely to a God who is Father and who loves me; it is adherence to a "You" who gives me hope and trust" (Benedict XVI, General Audience, October 24th 2012). Therefore, a person does not begin to believe simply because he or she has decided to do so. There are people who have a vast knowledge of the Christian religion but who are not believers. Knowledge is not the same thing as faith itself, even if believers do all that they can in order to know God and all that God has revealed.

The strengthening of faith happens through personal prayer and reflection on the Word of God. The best environment for strengthening faith is a living encounter with other believers, with whom we are able to pray together and speak about the most basic and essential values of life.

For personal/community reflection:

1. Jesus says: "You will know the truth and the truth will make you free " (Jn 8:32). The world of today proclaims instead a

distortion of the words of Jesus, raising unfounded fears: "If you know the truth, the truth will make you slaves". How can we distinguish, in the flood of present information, truth from falsehood, useful from harmful content?

2. Pallotti encouraged us to know the mentality, language and needs of the people among whom we live. Are we able to discover the most important needs of others regarding their means of livelihood and their hopes and fears for the future?
3. Pallotti wrote about the missionaries who should be "eager to learn with great precision and perfection the difficult art of the propagation of the Holy Faith" (OCC VII, p. 246). I am able to share my experience of faith with others?

The prayer of Benedict XVI for vocations for evangelisation (2007)

"[W]e turn to Mary, who supported the first community where "all these with one accord devoted themselves to prayer" (Acts 1: 14), so that she may help the Church in today's world to be an icon of the Trinity, an eloquent sign of divine love for all people. May the Virgin... intercede so that the Christian people will not lack servants of divine joy: priests who, in communion with their Bishops, announce the Gospel faithfully and celebrate the sacraments, take care of the people of God, and are ready to evangelize all humanity. May she ensure, also in our times, an increase in the number of consecrated persons, who go against the current, living the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, and give witness in a prophetic way to Christ and his liberating message of salvation.

May [Mary] help you to say with your lives: "Lo, I have come to do thy will, O God" (cf. Heb 10: 7)".

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