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The right to communicate

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The Right to Communicate:
A Response to Dr. Alice Gagnard

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Dr. Gagnard has reviewed much of the research material dealing with a more statistical approach to the study of audiences. I would like to present a very different perspective on how the Church might know its audience. In one way I don't disagree with what she has said; I think the analyses that have been done and the methods of approach — whether those be marketing approaches, consumer behavior and psychographic approaches, or uses and gratifications approaches — all can tell us something. However, they could also skew our perspective a little bit. And so, as a response I would like to offer a different perspective, but with this warning: I am going to overstate my case. If I have only a short space to respond, then expect a little bit of exaggeration.

I would like to discuss what has been developed over the last ten years in conferences of UCIP, (the International Union of the Catholic Press) in *Communio et Progressio,* and in UNESCO under the title "The Right To Communicate. I will approach this in two different ways: first of all, in a negative way by saying what this discussion reacts to and then in a positive way by reflecting on what this right is all about. Finally, I will conclude by expressing, at least in my opinion, why I think this is most appropriate for our discussions at this conference on A Vision All Can Share.

The uses and gratifications approach or any other statistical approach takes basically an external view of the audience. It depends upon an externalization of us as men and women who communicate. Even though the uses and gratifications and similar kinds of studies focus on an audience rather than on a message or on a structure (that is, they are an audience-centered media study), they still assume a top-down media structure as a natural structure. In other words, we simply look at characteristics of people "out there." The people seldom are real to us and it seems only proper that they remain in this abstracted realm of consumers who attend to our (or any publisher's or broadcaster's) messages. We see the same thing in what Father Joe O'Hare mentioned last night as the role of public opinion in the Church. Certainly the Church is attuned to the role of public opinion in a way different from commercial society, and yet public opinion in the Church still assumes as a very natural element a mediated structure of knowledge. We have to bring in the sociologists; we have to bring in the survey takers. It is not enough for us to say we can get to know the people, but rather we have to have someone tell us what the people think. We have to have somebody mediate to us the

possibility of having a Church. It is precisely this separation from people that hinders the right to communicate.

In a similar way, that is also a difficulty with considering communication as the right to information, or as the right to knowledge. When one uses various media to seek out knowledge (the instance that Dr. Gagnard mentioned was using the various media to find information about the Peace Pastoral), one accepts a certain position vis-a-vis the communication process. We already are taking a passive view of the audience. An audience is there; information is simply given to them. They might have a right to that information and they might look about for it, but at base the audience is seen as simply a kind of passive group at which we communicators throw all kinds of information. All of that, I maintain, comes from a mass media mentality. Briefly, that mentality assumes as natural and proper a unilateral, vertical flow of non-diversified information. Its best exemplification, as its name suggests, is found in the mass media.

If the discussion of the right to communicate reacts against the mass media mentality and its various appearances, what do its advocates seek as a positive alternative? Again, in brief, we can see this alternative perspective developed under three headings. First, the right to communicate includes such things as access to communication for all people, an equitable sharing of the benefits of information, the recognition of the importance both of a common heritage and of the multi-cultural diversity of that heritage, the right of all men and women to participate as communicators, and the availability of resources and technology to all. Second, the right to communicate proposes a perspective on communication in which the individual becomes an active partner in communication and not merely an object of the communication of an elite or privileged group. In other words, we see a switch from a mediated model of communication to a dialogic model. Third, this right to communicate involves us in a change of attitude to our own communication; this change of attitude then must lead to a change of structure of the means of our communication.

It seems to me that this view of communication (and of, if I can use the word in this context, the audience) is most appropriate to our discussions here. After all, we are discussing a communicative Church. On one level this applies to all the professional communicators in the Church. Bishop Malone began our conference by calling communication in the Church a shared pastoral ministry. This view is not simply a way for diocesan communicators to get a share of the pie, but a definition of ministry in the Church. The responsibility of communication, like the responsibility of evangelization, cuts across all barriers, functions, and ministries in the Church. It is a ministry that inherently involves a sharing with people of what is most important to us. It is a ministry which links all members of the Church.

To use St. Paul's phrase, this shared pastoral ministry begins in bearing with one another. All of us are members of the Church and all of us have a right to be heard. At the same time I think we have to recognize what Father

Joe O'Hare said yesterday: some opinions are going to carry more weight than others. That I think we would all accept. There are informed opinions which can act as a corrective for everyone else, but that still does not justify cutting off discussion or banning certain members of the Church from being able to speak in and with the Church. One of the things that we are doing at this conference is working towards a shared vision. We cannot possibly have a vision all can share unless all have a chance to speak of what that vision might be, of what they wish it to be. Here, let me again simply underline the right to communicate.

Bishop Malone also spoke about dialogue as being one of the themes for communication in the church. I think we have to recognize that as an operative mode of our communication, when everyone has a right to communicate. We are looking for a kind of communication which is not manipulation. In other words, we seek an anti-consumerist communication. We are not doing audience studies so that we can sell soap. We are not doing audience studies so that we can get people to contribute to the building fund of the church. We are doing an audience study so that we can then become more intimately associated with the people who make up the Body of Christ.

Now all of this is not simply a plea for small group communication. It is not simply a plea for saying we have to put more emphasis on the Sunday homily or on gathering study groups together. (It might well involve those things, though.) But even our mass media efforts can involve and participate in a right to communicate if we always begin with a certain recognition of our audience and of the rights of the men and women who make up the Church and who make up that audience.

What I am attempting to do in this reflection is to underline an alternative perspective on communication. There is another way of looking at our communication in the Church. There *is* another way. We don't have to reinforce a mass media mentality. We don't have to reinforce structures of domination. We can work instead for a communicative Church, a Church which is going to break down the kind of lines of, if I can use this rather harsh word, oppression which the mass media can bring about. All of us recognize that oppression. Anyone who has said, "there is a problem with programming on television," or "I don't like this, I don't like that, this is somehow dehumanizing," recognizes the oppression of the mass media.

The Church already stands for an approach which involves the right to communicate. What we need to do is to search our hearts and search our professional knowledge to understand how we as communicators in the Church can share it with everyone in the Church. How can we recognize their right to communicate?