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Paul Soukup, S.J., Frances Forde Plude, and Paul Philibert, O.P.

A Dialogue on Communication and Theology*

Theological Reflection and Communication

Paul A. Soukup, S.J.

Theology and communication seem to go together, at least because the Church is as much in the communication business as it is in the business of reflecting on its belief. Whether the disciples go forth to proclaim the good news to all the nations, or a diocese publishes a newspaper, or an entrepreneur starts a religious cable station, the Church is unmistakably linked to communication. On the other hand, the Church's is certainly not the only wave in the sea of information in which people live. Augustine noticed that and devoted the *De doctrina christiana* to a theological consideration of whether Christians should use fourth-century high tech communications (which is exactly what rhetoric was in his day). When he reached a positive conclusion, the Church had a theoretical rationale for what people intuitively did. Even before Augustine, Christians had used word, image, paintings, mosaics, songs, and pretty much anything else to proclaim and sustain their belief. Such usage had its critics, in people who felt that Christianity should avoid pagan forms (Goethals 1990; Miles 1985). And so, the question Augustine dealt with had as much to do with inculturation as with communications efficiency or public relations.

These questions still live today. We hear them posed in ways very similar to their fourth- or twelfth- or sixteenth-century predecessors: How should the Church proclaim its belief? Are some cultural forms inappropriate? Are we Christians so out of touch with popular culture

* This essay is based on a more extended conversation which took place at the Catholic Theological Society of America meeting in Baltimore, June 1994.

as to make our preaching of the gospel somehow irrelevant? The rapid growth in communication technology has heightened the importance of the debate: the last hundred years alone have seen the development of every mass medium save printing. Christian belief had little overt trouble adapting to the world of print, since that world largely intensified the manuscript culture the Church knew in its medieval period. But the mass culture of the twentieth century stands less on print than on images and here the Church seems a bit lost. The mass culture encouraged by these mass media itself seems strangely foreign to a Church more accustomed to thinking of itself in terms of local Churches.

The Second Vatican Council's *Inter Mirifica*, the Pontifical Council for Social Communication's *Communio et Progressio* (1971/1975), and its more recent *Aetatis Novae* (1992) all ask for more sustained reflection on communication and Church. The summons to examine the processes of communication in Church and society opens the door to a more cultural grounding of communication. This should interest theologians. Some theorists argue that the process of communication adopted by a culture deeply affects the whole culture, including its self-appropriation (Ong 1969, 1982). Such wide-ranging impacts will also affect the theology of each culture. For example, a culture whose chief form of communication is oral discourse will value a narrative theology, whereas one that depends on written texts will find more value in discursive argument and doctrinal formulation.

One might argue that these calls for theologians to reflect on communication are merely a kind of special pleading on behalf of one interested party in the Church. Why should theologians bother themselves with more or less specialized and somewhat esoteric materials? An argument from the cultural arena offers probably the strongest response. James DiGiacomo puts it this way:

It is becoming more and more evident to thoughtful religious people and to those who serve them that some of the greatest obstacles to effective communication and assimilation of religious beliefs and values are the pervasive and insistent messages of mass media and culture. These influences, all the more powerful because they are often not recognized, pose a threat not only to ministers of the Gospel but to bearers of any serious religious message (1994, 21).

Mass communication shapes the individuals who make up the Church, local and universal. In shaping them, mass communication also shapes their common language, their symbol systems, and the very possibil-

ity of reflection and communication. And religious concerns are largely absent from the world of mass culture. That is why, if for no other reason, theologians need to reflect on the context of belief, on what for Augustine became a question of inculturation. That question becomes not only, "How should the Church communicate?" but also, "How do we enter the local situation?"

The invitation to theological reflection on communication seems, then, to encompass at least two areas of encounter between Church and social communication. First and most broadly comes the cultural question. What kind of context does the "communication culture" provide for religious communication? What aspects of that communication world most closely touch on the proclamation of the gospel? Second, one could examine the role of communication in the Christian community. Is the Church, as Avery Dulles asserted in 1972, really communication?

I

The contemporary communication culture defines our world perhaps more than any other single factor. For many people this is self-evident; it becomes all the more dangerous because most people take this communication situation for granted. People live surrounded by the messages and programming of the mass media: newspapers, news-magazines, and light novels; early morning radio and easy-listening music; evening television's local news, entertainment, films—up to five hours a day for most people. Middle-aged adults may well remember the time when television first entered the American home and may fondly recall watching programs with their parents. But that experience is not the television experience today. Now the media mix socializes children (from *Sesame Street* to MTV). The media mix sets the national agenda but not always with clear priorities. Should we be surprised that Whitewater received three times more network news coverage than health care in the first quarter of 1994 (Hard numbers 1994, 17)? Should we be surprised that athletic teams occupy our national attention more than the civil wars in Rwanda, Angola, and Cambodia? The media mix structures the experience of living, constructing images of women, men, families, outsiders, work, and so on (Real 1994, 29–30). And the media mix distorts.

The resulting ideology shaped through media and reflected in them favors, for example, economic profit-taking over social commitment, abstract corporations over actual workers, consumer markets

over struggling populations, negative patriotism over internationalism, opportunism over principle. . . .

Advertising and consumerism serve these interests in constructing our culture. They create commodity fetishes and false consciousness unimaginable even to Marx. . . . The once-dreaded Seven Deadly Sins are now the deep structure of a culture of commercials and consumption (Real 1994, 31).

The cultural force of the mass media cannot be avoided and should not be dismissed.

Only recently have Church documents sensed the impact of the communication culture on the Church—or better, on the task of the Church. In one of the more telling examinations of the Church, Pope John Paul II summed up the communicative challenge of evangelization.

The means of social 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. In particular, the younger generation is growing up in a world conditioned by the mass media. . . . [Church] involvement in the mass media, however, is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. 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 the 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 (1991, no. 37).

Clearly, this is a task that exceeds anything Augustine faced in his treatment of rhetoric. As a task of inculturation it certainly rivals those of the encounters between European and non-European cultures in the sixteenth through nineteenth centuries.

It imposes a very particular challenge for us in the United States, whose mass culture and mass media dominate the world in the late twentieth century. The need to explore this communication culture in the United States resembles in some ways the demand posed by liberation theology in Latin America. Liberation theology grows from the experience of the people, particularly of the poor, the marginalized, and the oppressed. The gospel, then, comes as a powerful message of liberation to the forgotten and powerless. Following a kind of parallel (and not at all asserting any equivalence), we could note that the U.S. media culture creates its own unjust social structures, compounding the marginalization many already experience and both legitimiz-

ing and reinforcing the power relations within society. The media culture also alienates people through its hegemonic processes, commodity or consumerist mentalities, and defining hold on society. Such operations, however, occur in a subtle way, evoking general consent, even from those excluded and manipulated. The liberation model urges us to consciously examine these structures and to hear the gospel as a summons to freedom.

The media culture's content stands in need of a similar critique. This content—the images of women and men, the reduction of complexity, the allure of violence and sexuality, the embrace of ideology, the banishment of religion, the appeals to vulgarity—stands in opposition to the gospel at almost every juncture (Fore 1987). The theological heritage provides an anchor for a coherent and critical reading of the media content. It also could ground an alternative, for what we see and read need not constitute all our possibilities. Developing an approach to media content from the perspective of theology will help us to re-imagine the media.

The liberation theology model also suggests that, for the purposes of greater inculturation, we explore the workings of this media culture. But honestly engaging in this task means that we must develop new tools, just as liberation theologians developed tools to bring the gospel to bear on their lived experience. Rather than accepting conclusions and methods better suited to other situations, we in the United States must develop a distinctive approach to any theology that seriously considers the mass media. Such an approach should begin with people's experience of the media; it might then illumine the media world with the Scriptures or, conversely, illumine the Scriptures with insights from the world of communication.

II

Reflection on the Church itself can involve several different approaches. Following Dulles (1972), many hold that communication best expresses the nature of the Church. For them, "communication" shares not only a Latin root with "communion" but is its indispensable correlate. Within this perspective the analysis of the Church grows from considerations of its internal communication. Dulles himself draws parallels between the various models of the Church and their characteristic modes of communication (1989). This method might allow a different kind of ecclesiology. For example, one could seriously consider the effects of the dialogic communication process presupposed in the communion model of the Church versus the one-way communication process presupposed in a hierarchical model of the Church.

Since *Communio et progressio* first applied its claims about the right to information and the importance of public opinion to the Church itself in 1972, few have explored this aspect of communication and Church. This is somewhat surprising, given the discussion of the various norms and directives about theology and Catholic universities, and about the role of women in the Church. The lack of interest seems even more surprising when we consider that many of the more recent norms seem to limit the rights of communication so strongly endorsed by *Communio et progressio*.

Another area worth some reflection emerges from the Church's encounter with the culture of mass communication. As noted earlier, the Church tends to define itself more personally in terms of local Churches rather than in the anonymous terminology of the mass media. The cultural shift to the latter metaphor raises some questions about the adequacy of the various ways in which Church and world interact.

Theologians need not labor alone in these reflections, even though Church documents repeatedly call upon them for this work. All Christians need to think about their own communication as well as that of the Church. Just as none can abdicate participation in prayer, worship, or works of charity and justice, so all should join in an ongoing reflection on communication. Milan's Cardinal Carlo Martini asks as much of the people of his diocese in a series of pastoral letters on communication during 1990 and 1991. The duty to reflect on communication—both interpersonal and mediated—falls on everyone.

Authentic communication is not only necessary for the survival of a family, civic, or religious community. It is also a gift, a goal to strive for, a participation in the mystery of God who is communication.

All these reflections lead us to dedicate two years of our pastoral journey to *communication*. This is not a secondary or "luxury" theme. It is a matter of our very condition, of being man and woman and being Church (Martini 1990–1991/1994, 8).

Cardinal Martini then leads the people through a series of meditations on their own communication, on communication in the family, on communication in society, on communication in the Church, and finally on mass communication. In his view, we cannot become a communicative Church without each of us entering into the spirit of reflection, bringing the Scriptures to bear on our day-to-day lives which are lived in the midst of communication.

Theologians (particularly those with expertise in biblical, moral, and pastoral theology) can add a more critical voice. Where the non-

specialist may fall into simplification or exaggeration of religious themes, the theologian can offer a correction. The theologian can also more surely bring history and tradition to bear on contemporary communication and its structures. Theologians, with a distinct set of disciplinary values and tools, offer a very different perspective on our common experience precisely because they stand at a more pronounced hermeneutical distance. Particularly in matters of inculturation, theologians have vast experience as they deal with texts and materials created in diverse cultures throughout the thousands of years of Judeo-Christian history. This sensitivity allows them to come to grips with (and critique, where necessary) the mass media culture.

III

Let me conclude by sketching some more concrete ways to bring theology to communication. People will differ in their responses to these starting points; I present them only to trigger further thought. First, borrowing another page from Cardinal Martini's letters, one could view communication through the lens of the Scriptures and simultaneously view the Scriptures through the lens of communication. For example, we see in the Gospels how Jesus restores blocked communication. In his healing of the man who could neither hear nor speak (Mark 7:31-37), Jesus not only restores his physical senses but also restores him to the human community. Communication lies at the center of this vision of human life—it is precisely communication that God's gracious gift restores.

The image and likeness we always carry around inside us is a reflection of the one who made us and is a witness to the distortion that we have made of that desire and that holy and sacred right. The failures of human communication have at their roots the distortion of an impulse that is fundamental in us.

How then to straighten out and purify this true and profound passion that we carry inside us? . . .

It is God himself who meets us: God is communication, able to heal our failed communications and to fill us again with the grace of a healthy and constructive give and take in relationships (Martini 1990-1991/1994, 27).

One could apply this method of deducing appropriate interpersonal communication practices from the Scriptures to mass communication as well. In fact Cardinal Martini does precisely this in a second pastoral letter, written around the image of the hem of Jesus' garment, which the woman with the flow of blood touched.

The image of the hem of Jesus' mantle presents itself to us again in a meaningful way, questions us, interrogates us, and provokes us. This is the kind of seeing, judging, and acting that the Council Fathers taught. Our faith and our Christian values are firm not in order to lock us up in a strongbox, protected from our environment, but so we can measure ourselves against the world (1990-1991/1994, 120).

We come to understand ourselves and our mass media culture through our appropriation of the Scriptures.

A second way to bring theology to communication consists of applying some common theological categories to understanding communication processes. *Communio et progressio* does precisely this when it proposes the person of Jesus as the perfect communicator (no. 11). It considers especially the doctrine of the incarnation as the starting point from which to grasp communication. Other approaches could return to Augustine's theory of communication in *De Trinitate* as he ponders the expressive life of the Trinity. Still others might turn to Thomas Aquinas in his examination of divine-human communication.

A very different strategy has its origins in the cultural products of the mass media. This one reverses direction and comes to theology through the issues raised in film, television, and popular music. Henk Hoekstra and Marjeet Verbeek propose ethics or moral theology as a point of study, though others may wish to arrive at different destinations from different theological or cultural starting points. "We see narrative communication as the first objectification of the moral experience. And since we judge audiovisual media as primarily dramatic and narrative, we see them as objectifications of moral experiences and therefore as sources for an ethical reflection, which occurs not primarily in argumentative rational discourse but in narrative communication" (1994, 213). Working with groups they trace out the lines of moral reasoning; their theological practice involves both interpersonal communication (as the group develops its theological conclusions) and mass communication (as the media products provide materials for reflection).

There are many other points of contact from which to reflect theologically about communication. The challenge for all of us is to take the culture of communication as seriously as its impact on our living deserves.

How Communication Studies Can Help Us to Bridge the Gap in Our Theology Metaphors

Frances Forde Plude

. . . the spoken word is the normal vehicle of faith. . . . In our times the "word" also becomes image, colors and sounds, acquiring varied forms from the diverse media of social communications (Medellin Conference, 1968).

The *word* informs both theology and communication. Words serve us as content and as vehicles of *transmission*. What happens when "the word" is altered—when the communication content and the transmission technologies change?

For people of Christian faith, the communication between God and the people of God was altered dramatically when God entered history to interact as person with all of humanity. Today we are living in another period of altered communication, one spurred primarily by technological tools. All of us have had our patterns of work, of relationship, of faith, dramatically altered by a tumultuous communications revolution similar in its impact to the introduction of printing in the fifteenth century.

Most of us learned in textbooks, even in high school, that there was a connection between the introduction of the technology of printing and the democratization of thought. Is there any doubt that this played a role in the Reformation (Eisenstein 1979)? Similar structural changes are underway today in a global community linked now by digital bits as well as by printed documents. What are the implications for those of us who care deeply about effective communication among ourselves, and with our God? In these pages I will (1) provide an overview of communication scholarship trends, (2) offer some reflections concerning the impact of new technologies that promote human interaction and cooperative alliances, and (3) make some practical suggestions that can enrich our communication-theology integration.

COMMUNICATION SCHOLARSHIP

The dialogic aspect of communication study has emerged from much previous theory. Early communication research stressed the impact of messages moving from a single source to a receiver, with the possibility, of course, that the message received was not necessarily the same one that was sent, due to variations of perception, a sort of "static"

that interferes with the message content (Shannon and Weaver 1949). One could speak, I suppose, of sin as similar "static" interposing itself between God's message to us and our reception and implementation of the divine message in our lives.

Other communication research has dealt with the power of mass media in altering our consciousness and informing our choices—the propaganda or advertising aspect of media messages (Lasswell 1927; Roloff and Miller 1980). This type of analysis is very much a part of current concerns about how media manipulate, for example encouraging us to become more active consumers, creating unrealistic perceptions of a more violent world, and imposing American culture on media audiences throughout the globe.

Other scholars have dealt with the agenda-setting role of media, especially news media (McLeod, Becker, and Byrnes 1974). Our media define what is "news" and we allow them to do it when we focus our own discussions upon the news content as it has been defined for us by media players. We all know that these so-called news experts have real limitations. For example, they work within an industry, a business, that defines most news stories in terms of conflict narratives. They stress the bizarre and they often do so in short sound bites rather than with in-depth analysis. And yet, their choices define what our news is and we know what is chosen by these agenda-setters by what is transmitted on radio and TV, the main source of news today for most of the world's population.

Some communication research has focused on a critique of media economic power and the problem of increasing portions of media profits being in the hands of fewer and fewer corporations (Compaine 1982). These data provoke concern in terms of economic justice, but another real issue is that media owners and players are "gatekeepers," with the power to define who has access to information. In an information economy, information is what we use to leverage ourselves into economic transactions. By ownership of the channels and the profits and the prices, modern media players could become a new type of feudal baron. However, modern communication technologies are breaking up this gatekeeper monopoly. The late Ithiel de Sola Pool, in *Technologies of Freedom* (1983), was one of the first to note the decentralizing impact of new interactive communication technologies on policies and markets.

All of this indicates the importance of public policies in telecommunications—issues such as legislation or how much our governments should regulate in the public's interest and how much the marketplace should decide. This issue of public policy relates to the duties of the

human race as stewards of the gifts of creation, including scientific and technological gifts.

Another exciting thread of communication scholarship has incorporated advances in anthropology; this research focuses on communication and culture (Carey 1989). Such scholars speak of liminality, myth, ritual, and symbol found by audiences within the stories of our cultures. Perhaps most of our stories are told today through media channels—fictional stories, news stories, advertising stories. Theologians and pastoral leaders make a big mistake when they ignore the fact that global audiences interact with these stories as they view them. Many people who do not watch much TV themselves need to keep in mind that humanity now gathers around the TV and movie screen for the magical stories that were once shared by bards. People absorb information and principles of socialization from these stories—from the quest of “Star Trek” to the brash dialogue of “The Simpsons.” Much of this type of research has been done on the impact and the global popularity of the soap opera “Dallas” (Liebes and Katz 1990).

Incidentally, although evangelical media have been analyzed (Hoover 1988), very little research has been done on communication patterns within Churches. It might be surprising to discover the dynamics of communication flows within the U.S. Catholic Church: who listens to whom; how various messages get transferred (and transformed) within the institutional Church; which messages are credible or meaningful in the beliefs of the faith-community; and to what extent the culture, including the media, alter these messages. There could be very interesting findings in such research!

Linguistic analysis has been a very serious thread of communication studies, based on the philosophy of language, or semiotics. David Tracy’s work (1975) has focused our attention on religious language. Dialogic anthropology proposes that humankind becomes human through communication, with varied communication patterns. Communication-theory scholars have probed ramifications of the technological interconnected web of networks of which we are all a part.

Everett Rogers, one of the foremost scholars of the communication field, has claimed that interactive, two-way technologies represent an epistemological turning point in communication research (Rogers 1986). We are moving from linear, point-to-point communication patterns to a web of networked interactions, where individual two-way dialogues are linked with wider groups. So we move from dyads to forums as we begin to use newer technological tools to decentralize the dynamics of messages. Televised broadcasts from the streets of China and Russia have shown global audiences that with telephones and fax machines

and computer terminals it is no longer possible to control communication from a centralized source. There are obvious implications for hierarchical structures and top-down communication styles.

My own research emphasis in harnessing technological tools for public service—in education, in medicine, and in servicing the basic needs of the poor—has led me to conceptualize strategies to facilitate *cooperative (linking) ventures* because communication technologies change so rapidly and the entrepreneurial opportunities are so vast. This situation requires collaborative strategic planning and much of my own thinking and writing has stressed this approach, called “strategic alliances” by the corporate sector. Interactive strategic alliances (ISAs) form the heart of making collaboration a social habit by institutionalizing collaborative mechanisms.

A COMMUNICATION MEDIA CONTEXT

One might first ask, what are the ramifications of living in a “wired” or “mediated” world? What, exactly, is this “information age” that we speak of so glibly? What do theologians have to do with the so-called information superhighway and a five-hundred-channel world? Here are some examples of technological links that go beyond the simple exchange of movie and TV stories:

- If its present rate of growth continues, the computer network Internet will have 300 million users by 1999, 750 million by 2000, and 1.5 billion by 2001.
- As computer power increases and the size of the unit decreases, personal communication networks will permit wireless interconnection from units that fit in our hand or suit pocket.
- The economics and the ease of interconnection will alter our habits from independence to interdependence. Our technological link-ups foster attitudes that blend both a global identity and a fierce ethnic pride. One analyst commented about computer forums and bulletin boards: “E-mail is a tribe-maker . . . at the same time [that] it globalizes us.”
- Interactive TV has the potential (in the United States) to tap into the fifteen-billion-dollar-per-year video rental market, the ten-billion-dollar-per-year arcade game market, and the home retail market, which may be worth hundreds of billions of dollars every year.

In Russia, in Somalia, in Bosnia, in South Africa, mass media and smaller interactive technologies provide a window through which global audiences gaze and actively participate. This seems to link us

globally while at the same time provoking regional alliances and ethnic-pride skirmishes. How will this impact the human family searching for God?

We probably need, as Rogers suggests, to reexamine much theory and practice in the light of this "wired" world. Some medieval faith constructs were linked to the idea of the sun revolving around the earth. As Galileo learned, when new scientific information is put forward it is not easy to let go of our comfortable paradigms. Change disrupts; today's rapid change disrupts exponentially.

Words and images, used metaphorically, provide central symbols of the Christian tradition. Such symbols, we have been told, give rise to thought. Theologians, of course, have already risked exploring new metaphors and updating symbols. Both liberation theory and feminist theory have pushed theologians into new arenas.

Today's rapidity of change (technological, symbolic, metaphorical, communicative) challenges us to reflect and communicate about faith within changing Church communities in changing cultures. This is a task which theologians and communication theorists and practitioners should address through much dialogue and joint analysis.

CHANGING PATTERNS

I have begun to reflect more systematically on the impact of modern interactive communication technologies on our individual and collective (institutional) expressions of faith. In a recent essay, I explore how communication interactivity is a metaphor for a more *dialogic* "communio" ecclesiology (Plude 1994). In that text I explore four questions: (1) What forms of participatory communication are emerging in Churches and what is the role of authority in such forums? (2) How do we encourage collaboration, which the theologian Hermann Pottmeyer calls "animating forms of cooperation"? (3) Must participatory freedom lead to polarization and, in reaction, central control? (4) Can new communication and collaborative theories help Churches become vital communities, to reanimate an apparent diminution of faith in some modern societies?

In trying to answer these questions, I found supportive texts in Karl Rahner, Bernard Lonergan, Avery Dulles, Walter Kasper, Edward Schillebeeckx, Joseph Komonchak, Patrick Granfield, Bernard Häring, and others. My reflections took an "open systems" view of Church, based somewhat on Granfield's (1973) study. A very helpful framework for analysis is used by Paul Soukup (1983), where he organizes the literature around four major theological themes: religious self-understanding, Christian attitudes toward communication, pastoral

uses of communication, and ethics and advocacy. He then sets up a matrix to cross-classify the literature around the following communication analogues: linguistic, aesthetic, cultural, interpersonal, sender-receiver, and theological. These categories are reflected in the summary provided above of communication concepts in the research literature.

I will suggest three aspects of new technology interactivity and offer some potential applications for religious theory and practice. Instead of talking about using TV to evangelize, I will focus upon the changes forced upon us by interactive or two-way communication/computer tools. Such intragroup communication changes are of great significance to faith communities; however, this often is neglected in our concern over the impact of mass media.

One changing pattern is occurring within organizational structures. As interactive technologies become more widespread, organizations are flattened; they become more horizontal than vertical. A key organizational reason for the change is that it is no longer necessary to have everyone located in one central place because connections (as well as communication) within the organization are facilitated by technology—computers, fax machines, and wireless telephony, for example. Many organizations, therefore, are spreading out, decentralizing their operations, simply linking them technologically instead of organizing large numbers of people in one place.

With this distribution of organizational structure tends to come a shared responsibility and accountability. Large bureaucracies are struggling to follow corporate organizations in a major movement toward decentralization. In addition to being possible technologically, this is proving more productive.

Another organizational pattern involves linking up the dispersed units. Interactive technologies foster team linkages because tasks can be facilitated by data-base management systems. The salesperson, inventory clerk, and bookkeeper can all do their piece of a customer's order because each one is operating from the same data base within the computer system. Such team linkages are almost seamless or invisible, but they are becoming a daily part of organizational patterns and relationships. Modern organizations see many groups interconnect around tasks instead of in the old departmental arrangements. These ad hoc groupings within organizational structures allow flexibility that was not possible in former, rigid organizational patterns.

Much of this relationship reflection makes one think of covenantal concepts in salvation history. Theology deals much with relationship and must, of course, be aware of changing relationships in human-

kind's history. One theologian mentioned to me recently that he reminds his students that the concept of "father" changes somewhat with modern culture. Thus we need to seek religious-language metaphors that work in our age.

The organizational patterns described above entail governance changes also. Top-down hierarchical management structures are melting into shared responsibility patterns. Members of such organizations tend to have more autonomy. Obviously it is vital to coordinate (link) the units and this is a major challenge when organizational structures are dispersed.

It is not difficult to see the connection between these organizational patterns and theological questions such as the issue of the local Church in ecclesiology. In many organizations there is often a tension (which can be quite creative) between the central and the local authority. As this is discussed theoretically (and under the guidance of the Spirit), it could be helpful for theologians to be aware that, on the practical level, these issues are linked to communication theories and technologies that have transformed organizational patterns in our day.

A second aspect of the change instituted by two-way technological tools relates to communication flows themselves. We are all linked into many networks. And our communication messages can now be stored for later use (e.g., by telephone answering machines, computer E-mail, fax messages). The dialogic communication flow breaks out of the tyranny of controlled one-way programmed media. It is possible that the incredible popularity of the VCR is directly related to the desire latent within us to control our own programming content and our viewing time-frame.

Communication patterns within institutions are more participatory in an interactive communication technology world. Feedback (talkback) becomes a common communication mode and it is difficult to return to an authoritative top-down communication style. It is no accident that small group media are a favored communication mode in small base communities of faith. These tools allow interaction and the communication loop is energized by this participatory potential.

Another rich aspect of this interactive communication pattern is what one author has called "shared minds." Corporations using teleconferencing usually cite the savings possible because people do not have to travel to get to meetings; they can be linked into a meeting technologically (by telephone, computer, or video). However, the larger payoff may well be that ideas are born from the process of collective input that the format of a forum permits. There is an accumulation, a piling-up, of thinking when one is part of an interactive group.

I cannot help but think of the work of John Henry Newman or Yves Congar when reflecting upon a participatory theology, as the Church struggles to move toward more inclusive roles for laity, for women, for national cultures. One is also reminded of our obligation to give the poor a voice and options that are more meaningful than violence. We are seeing participation in the political arena (U.S. talk shows, faxes fueling uprisings in China and Russia). Our communities of faith, too, are interactive liturgically, sacramentally, and a technological world can serve these faith communities.

One must also consider the concept of technology as power. Information technologies like the telephone have long been considered basic necessities in developed nations, although there are surprisingly large blocks of people even in the United States without telephone access. A farmer in a remote village in India is economically disadvantaged if he does not know current prices at a regional market and he is unable to sell his crops at the right time. Even access to a village phone transforms economic realities for him and his family if it allows him to monitor market prices some distance away. In fact, the growing use of "wireless" technologies will allow such nations to "leapfrog" over previous wired technologies.

Access to information technology is a power issue, an economic issue, a justice issue. Interactive technologies offer the chance to transform the concept of "power over" to "power *with*." A gospel response to new technologies is to safeguard access for all God's children rather than reserve most of the goods for a favored few.

I would recommend, finally, some interaction between a theology of spirituality and those who become victims of new technological tools. Who among us does not regret that information technologies move information faster and faster, increasing the pace of our lives? As one who struggles to be contemplative I find that I must occasionally pull the plug! Communication technologies can inform the theological enterprise, but how very much the interactive world needs to be reminded of Thomas Merton's comment in his *Asian Journal*: "the deepest level of communication is not communication, but communion. It is wordless. It is beyond words, beyond speech, beyond concept."