

Mass Media & Promoting Integral Ecology in the Digital Age: Vatican/Catholic Mass Media Perspective

By Sr Bernadette Reis

I would like to begin by asking the question “What is at stake?”. If we can respond to that question, we will begin to understand the difficulty we have in communicating our message regarding the care of creation.

Pope Francis has alluded to “What is at stake” many times. He has often said, “Unless something is done now, it will be too late.” The “stake” is not only a future for the earth, but a future for everything living on earth. This is a very high stake. And unless things change drastically, that future looks pretty dim.

To illustrate this point, I would like to tell a story that I heard from a Bishop in the Philippines. In November 1999, I found myself in the Philippines for a conference on the economical aspect of our mission. One of the speakers really impressed me. I remember two things that he told us.

The first is that whenever we go into a territory that has not yet been evangelized, that we, like Moses, must remove our sandals. Why? Because Christ has preceded us. He is already there. Therefore, the ground on which we stand is holy.

The second is a story he told of a group of Christian missionaries who were being led by “pagan” scouts on their way to a missionary destination. They stopped when they came to some mango trees and everyone ate some of the luscious fruit. When the indigenous “pagans” were ready to leave, they were surprised because the people they were leading, “Christian” missionaries, were packing their sacks full of fruit. “What are you doing?” they asked the missionaries. “We are taking the fruit with us so that we will have it in the future”, the “Christian” missionaries replied. “If you take all the ripe fruit,” the indigenous “pagan” guides responded, “what will those who pass by later have to eat?”

This story illustrates the point we are at. The “stake” is that future generations will starve if we do not do something now to leave them a better “common home” now.

This requires drastic change. It is hard enough to get people to change in little ways, let alone drastically. The challenge for us is to communicate in such a way that those who come into contact with our message will *want* to change. How? That they will recognize that Christ is present in every corner of the globe, and therefore, every corner of the globe is holy ground which cannot be desacralized for any reason. The second is that we help ourselves only to what we need, trusting in God’s providence, and leave what we do not need to those who will follow us.

Therefore, we need to be very smart in crafting our message. In order to do that, we need to understand the philosophy of those who oppose our message. For me, the quintessential event that will help us understand the philosophy behind those who stand for exactly the opposite of what we are communicating is “Pachamama”. Why do I say this? I say it because it demonstrates in a nutshell what our greatest challenge is.

I am sure you all are familiar with the event that took place during the Synod of Bishops on the Pan-Amazon region. First, our Holy Father, and those who took part in the prayer service in the Vatican Gardens on 4 October were accused of idolatry because of the presence of a statue of what later came to be identified as “Pachamama”.

I know some of you were wondering when I would bring this communication tragedy up. It cannot be avoided, and much of what I am presenting today comes from what I have learned from that tragedy. First of all, that event completely hijacked the Synod, as well as the interpretation of the event as idolatry, etc. What went wrong? For me, it is all about significance. Communicators must interpret for people when things are foreign for them. If we do not give people the meaning behind the code, the symbol, the liturgy, they will create their own meaning.

Let’s get back to Pachamama. About mid-way into the Synod, someone took the images that were in a church near St Peter’s, and threw them into the Tiber River. But what is the real significance of this action? Is it just that someone robbed a statue from a Church? Is it only to be evaluated as an idol that could have no further significance to a Christian?

In my opinion, the significance value of throwing this statue into the river is huge. And we must understand the symbol value behind this image. This statue represents one of – if not the most sacred aspects of human life: a woman with child. If we contemplate this statue, it is a profound representation of motherhood. In my opinion, there is no difference between the action of throwing away, discarding, drowning, this image than there is with the account in the Book of Revelation of the woman about to give birth with the dragon about to devour her child. What is worse, is that this action was done by a “devout” Catholic, that he was lauded for his actions, paraded throughout the U.S. like a hero, and that all the huge Catholic pro-life groups commended him for his action.

So why am I linking this event with the need to be smart about crafting our message? It’s because we as Catholics have been fed with some philosophies, and some bad theologies, that have actually created this fundamentalist mindset. They believe God is on their side due to past teachings of the Church. In my opinion, the Church’s record, in some aspects, needs to be revisited and in some cases corrected. It’s true about issues regarding ecology, and it is true about women’s place in the Church. In many ways, the two issues are suffering from the same destructive mentality in the Church.

What aspect of the Church’s teaching needs to be reconsidered? The philosophical understanding about inanimate creation. The fact that Aristotelian philosophy was picked up by St Thomas Aquinas, and then “canonized” by the church is no help at all. In fact, it is not to Thomas that Pope Francis appeals, but to Francis regarding care for our common home. Somehow, those aspects about Revelation that would encourage a more holistic approach to our relationship with creation have never entered sufficiently into Catholic theology. Paul’s understanding of the cosmic Christ, for example. Yet, the Creed picks up on that truth. The Creed, devoutly prayed every Sunday by every church-going Catholic proclaims that in Christ, all things have been made.

Every Easter vigil, we hear again how God’s word spoke, and things were made. Yet, the fact that creation is God’s first act of revelation, has not been developed in our theology. Pope Francis is

gradually introducing this as he reminds us that when we destroy creation, we are, in fact, destroying God's Word.

Using arguments for example that God's same word creates all of creation. God spoke with the sun, the earth, the stars, snakes, grass, mosquitoes were made. Therefore, whenever we damage creation, we are desecrating God's word. In the same way that we desecrate the bible. This should have profound implications on the way that we harvest our food, and cattle...

There is a lot to be explored in this area. For example, the Eucharist. Jesus is present in the inanimate matter of bread and wine. Leaving the philosophical aspects behind, can we allow that mystery to speak to us so we can perhaps develop some ways of reaching our fellow Catholics? God, in Jesus, first clothes Himself with our nature, then He clothes himself under the appearance of bread and wine. Through tradition, it is believed that He left his image on at least two pieces of cloth: Veronica's veil and the shroud. If we contemplate these examples, what is revealed is exactly what Scripture reveals. All things have been made through Christ. Therefore, He can potentially enter into relationship with anything created, and does so according to the specific nature of each created being. This is phenomenal. But what are the repercussions morally speaking?

Why am I starting with philosophical and theological concepts? Because it is philosophy, ideas, etc. that we use to communicate on the small or grand scale. As with any other area, we need to find "common ground" on which to construct our arguments. We have to be very smart. Therefore, we might appeal to Benedict XVI or John Paul II rather than to Pope Francis at times. Why? Because Pope Francis turns some people off. We have to fit the communication to the audience. And we may even need to appeal to Thomas Aquinas whom, I believe, did teach that animals would one day make it to heaven Even though they are saying the same thing in this regard, unfortunately Pope Francis is a turn off....

The biggest challenge, therefore, regarding communicating an ecological message in the digital age is crafting the message. How to spread that message is the second biggest challenge.

I am of the opinion that various ecological minded groups need to create communication plans together. In this way, resources, both economic and human, are pooled together. I am not sure if many messages or one united voice, is a better strategy. However, I believe that networks of groups focused on the care of creation is the way to go. Something like REPAM in Latin America.

I also believe that good communication plans are necessary and valuable.

- We need to make the use of free media by attracting journalists.
 - This means crafting events, and they need to be big
 - It requires creating relationships, informing them through press releases, having people prepared for interviews
 - If we are working in the Church, it may mean having a crisis communication plan in place (this is what was lacking during the Synod)
 - It also means being creative and using popular culture, including fiction, film and song writers. This is an area that is often overlooked by Catholic communicators

However, I would like to end by how I began, with the bishop I heard speak in the Philippines. Why do I remember the two things he told us so well after 21 years? I do not remember anything else from that seminar as clearly as I remember these two items. One is his creative application of Scripture that stuck in my mind. The other was he told a story. I think in the Church in general, and perhaps in our communication about ecological issues, stories are lacking. We need to tell the story of actual people and how their lives are being devastated because of *our* choices. We need to show the people who are affected because of the gold that is being mined for our chalices and ask the question if God really wants blood-gold in which to hold His blood....

What are the take aways?

1. Correcting the record in order to have more convincing ideas and philosophies within the Catholic tradition
2. Networking
3. Being smart about how we communicate and craft our arguments with each audience