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The Church as Moral Communicator

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What role does the Church—as a *communicator*—play in shaping the moral imagination of society? The question itself poses further questions. What is the Church, *as a communicator*? How does the Church act as a communicator of morals? What should the Church do to shape morals? Briefly, I will argue that the Church functions as a moral communicator at several levels, that the Church works best as a moral communicator when the Church shapes the imagination, and that such shaping occurs when the Church is most honestly the Church at the local level.

1. The Church's Moral Communication

Consider the following examples of the Church's moral communication:

- The American Bishops worked through several two-to-three-year processes and issued, after much consultation and debate, a series of pastoral letters or drafts on peace and nuclear weapons, on the economy, and on the role of women in the church.
- Mary Smith, a catechist, teaches a fifth grade class about the life of Jesus and asks the children to draw pictures of different scenes from the Gospels. The process of education, with its thousands of variations, is repeated in parochial schools, Sunday schools, and Catholic high schools across the country.
- Pope John Paul II flies across the globe on pilgrimage to the countries of Africa and Asia, to Canada, to the countries of Europe, to the countries of North and South America. In each place Catholics gather for huge outdoor Masses with numbers reaching into the hundreds of thousands.
- Pope John Paul II publishes an encyclical on social justice, running 50 pages in length. The *New York Times* publishes an excerpt, but the full text doesn't reach the people for several weeks.

• John Jones, an "ordinary Catholic" tries to live his life faithful to the Gospel. He helps with the St. Vincent de Paul Society in his community. Those who know him think he is a decent man.

These form just a few of the ways in which the Church communicates messages and morals in the world today. The list certainly doesn't exhaust the possibilities but does suggest some conclusions. If we add the mass media in the United States into the picture, it would surprise none of us that the actions of Pope and bishops might make the six o'clock news or the morning edition. What we should try not to forget is that the actions of Mary Smith and John Jones play just as vital a role in shaping the moral communication of the Church.

2. Formal Channels

The moral communication of the Church takes two forms. On the one hand lies formal moral teaching: This results from an ongoing reflection on key situations and issues according to the methods of moral theology and philosophical ethics. The bishops' pastorals on war and peace and on the economy are good examples of this process. Papal or Vatican statements on social justice and medical ethics are other examples of the same thing. On the other hand lies an informal moral teaching, a common sense morality, the way we Catholic Christians do things.[1]

Applying any kind of communication analysis to the first type of moral teaching leads to considerations of effectiveness, information, and public relations. Here is the message, the Church seems to say; now how can we best communicate it? In this instance, the Church as a communicator doesn't seem all that different from the White House, General Motors, or Jello—despite the differences in message content. The persuasive form of communication looks to source, message, and audience. Following an Aristotelian scheme of rhetoric, one would evaluate moral communication in terms of source credibility, logic and clarity of topic, and attention to audience characteristics.[2] In most instances this analysis suggests that the nature of the audience powerfully determines the methods of persuasion. Does the Church address the world? If so, in what forum? Does the leadership of the Church address its members? If so, how? The presentation of the credibility of the communicator and, to an extent, the message itself will change according to which group the Church addresses. Traditionally, the formal moral teaching of the Church stresses a hierarchical source and a carefully crafted message directed first to Church members who, it presumes, wel-

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[1] See Henk Hoekstra and Marjeet Verbeek, Chapter 16, below, for more on this.

[2] Stephen W. Littlejohn, *Theories of Human Communication* 2nd ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1983) 134.

come the message. Only secondly does this formal teaching office address non-members; when it does, it must choose a more explicitly persuasive rhetorical style. In both instances, however, the canons of rhetoric and public relations apply because at this level the Church seems not to differ at all from any other organization.[3]

Of course, many members of the Church and its hierarchy think that the Church does indeed differ significantly from other organizations; that may well be true in terms of the nature of the Church, but that distinction does not apply in terms of the Church's communicative behaviors. The fact that Church officers often accept neither the similarity of the Church to other organizations nor the necessity for audience discrimination has far-reaching effects, often frustrating for those who work for the various communication offices of the Church. Many of these communication professionals chafe at not being allowed to do what they consider standard procedure. For example, I recall an official in the Vatican's Communication Office remarking that he was not allowed to prepare a press release highlighting the important sections of a papal encyclical because, he was told, all the sections of an encyclical are equally important. He was unable to convince the others that the press pool itself—not trained in theology, church history, or philosophy—would prepare such a digest before reporting the encyclical. They did. And in that moment the Church lost any control over how the encyclical was reported around the world. In a similar way, the Vatican has in the past refused to distribute advance copies of its publications even to the bishops, thus preventing leaks but also leaving the local bishops unprepared to comment on Church moral teaching. Thankfully, this practice has changed.

A full discussion of the Church as a moral communicator in the formal sense would have to include the whole range of ways in which the church approaches the communication media. These channels through which the Church speaks include the press, the wire services, the publishing industry, electronic news agencies, and even the local parish where papal and episcopal statements trickle down in the forms of homilies and bulletin inserts. Immense problems plague this kind of communication, not the least of which has to do with who interprets the messages. Related to this, too, is the temporal bias of the media used to communicate. Everything slides towards immediacy in the news business: A moral statement might make page one, but only for one day.

Despite the significance of these formal channels and methods of communication and despite their problems, they are not necessarily the most important kinds of moral communication in the Church. The encyclicals

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[3] It is interesting to note, too, that with the possible exception of the American Bishops, the Church remains solidly print-oriented in its communication of moral teaching. Perhaps the subject-matter and the methods of moral teaching demand the logic of print, but that rhetorical approach limits the availability of the message.

and pronouncements are interesting; they are vital in shaping the outlook of the Church; but they do not occupy the places in which people live their lives. For this, let us turn to the other realm: the day-to-day, the common sense Catholic living.

3. Informal Channels

Without pretending any of the refinements of moral theology, I would like to suggest that moral action, for most people, emerges from a kind of taken-for-granted framework. People simply presume that they act morally, usually without thinking about it, until they find themselves either in a moral failing or in a complex situation. This model here borrows from Aristotle's thought on moral habit and Hopkins's "The just man justices," but basically it is a communication model: We presume language works, taking all manner of things and processes for granted, until communication fails or a situation demands some kind of planned discourse. In normal conversation we simply presume we understand, using a kind of taken-for-granted rule. When we discover that we really don't understand, we might ask a question.[4] In more complex settings—in a long-term interpersonal relationship, for example—we plug on ahead until we notice a communication breakdown. At that moment we look to theory and seek out a kind of guiding principle for the next step. We might consult with friends or even call upon an expert for advice. Then, generally, we do the best we can.

Granted that the stakes are higher and the issues more profound, I think that the moral life of most Church members follows a similar pattern. Most married couples do not wrestle with whether or not to remain faithful to one another; they just do so. Only in moments of stress or failure do questions arise about what one consciously ought to do. Similarly, most people live their lives with a kind of taken-for-granted respect for human life. The majority of us do not confront issues of medical ethics (when does life begin? when does life end? must extraordinary measures be taken in this situation?). If those issues arise, then we look to the moral theologian or the expert for help.

In this situation of taken-for-granted acting, the role of the Church as moral communicator becomes extremely important. How do people learn those daily behaviors? Standard communication theory borrows from sociology and psychology here. The work of George Herbert Mead examines the function of society in teaching language and other roles to its members.[5]

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[4] Robert Hopper, "The Taken-for-Granted," *Human Communication Research* 7 (1981) 195-211.

[5] George Herbert Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society from the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, ed. Charles W. Morris (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934). See, too, Jürgen Habermas's reinterpretation and extension of Mead in his

The social use of language comes first; the individual uses only later. Individuals, like baseball players (Mead's example), must learn all the roles of the group in order to successfully enact their own. In this view, to become a moral actor means to become a full member of the group. Similarly, Albert Bandura's social learning theory sketches out a model of how individuals learn behaviors from their society.[6] In his view, they combine informational (cognitive) and motivational (emotional) reinforcement with modelling and role playing: A potential action must first seem desirable. To become a moral actor means imitating what one loves.

Therefore, the morally communicating Church in this instance of the day-to-day is the community of the Church. And, at rock bottom, that community is the local community which communicates through interpersonal dealings and personal discourse. That community is the chief place where people can "see how they love one another." That community puts into action whatever moral tradition might take on life for its members.

In an ideal world the local community forms the place where the people gather to listen to the Word of God, to let that Word touch their hearts, and to share the Eucharist. The local community becomes, after the family, the school of love in which people learn to reach out to one another and to civil society. The local community forms the environment in which people experience love, forgiveness, trust, and support as they seek to put the Gospel into action in their lives. To the local community—first of all but not exclusively—apply the admonitions of the Church's documents on communication that the Church as communicator take Christ as a model:

> While he was on earth Christ revealed himself as the perfect communicator. Through his incarnation he utterly identified himself with those who were to receive his communication, and he gave his message not only in words but in the whole manner of his life. He spoke from within, that is to say, from out of the press of his people. He preached the divine message without fear or compromise. He adjusted to his people's way of talking and to their patterns of thought. And he spoke out of the predicament of their time.[7]

It is this kind of environment that leads to the moral sense which works on the day-to-day level.

Three aspects of the communication process on the local level lead to the kind of moral communication suggested here. According to both Mead

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wide-ranging sociological theory of human activity: *Theory of Communicative Action*, 2 vols. Thomas McCarthy, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1984 & 1987).

[6] Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.Y.: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

[7] Pontifical Commission on the Instruments of Social Communication, "Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication" *(Communio et Progressio)*, in *Vatican II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents,* ed. Austin Flannery (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1975). no. 11.

and Bandura, people learn behaviors from role models which they find attractive, salient, and understandable. Past Church history shows an intuitive recognition of the need for role models in our human living: The cult of the saints (even with all of its abuses and hagiographic excesses) provided a strong set of characters for every moral occasion. The local community needed only to use its wisdom to draw on the appropriate model. The Church's moral teaching, then, depends greatly upon the people who make up the community, upon how they live their lives, and upon their collective memory of holiness. This implies three conclusions. First, granted we are all sinners, we still live under an urgency to model moral behavior for one another. This means that no one in the Church can be content with a spiritual laissez-faire but must model forgiveness as well as holiness. Second, every local community maintains some degree of the tradition of role models since each contains some individual women and men whose lives are noteworthy. I wonder, however, how often we as a Church explicitly recognize these people for who they are. Third, it seems to me that this modelling is not something just for children; we adults equally need it. The strongest encouragements to my own moral living have come from the witness of the lives of others.

The moral communication of the local church also comes through teaching. This most properly links the local church with the Church universal. The Church possesses a tradition of the Scriptures, the Councils, doctrinal pronouncements, moral conclusions, theology, and philosophy. The teaching role of the local church makes this material known to people, not necessarily in all its detail, but at least well enough so that individuals realize that a tradition exists and that they can go to that tradition when the need arises. Education in the local church—whether on the grammar school, high school, university, or adult level—teaches this tradition and, according to the students' age level, the methodology of the tradition. The tradition gives not only a sense of what the Church has thought over the centuries; it also sketches boundaries by teaching what has not worked and identifying what has led to evil rather than to good. Because most of us immediately think of teaching when we reflect on the moral tradition of the church, less needs to be said here about it.

The third aspect the Church's moral communication falls under the heading of imaging or imagining. Imagination leads us to new possibilities for faithful living and moves the notion of moral reasoning from the "is this allowed" stage to the "what ought one to do" stage. In other words, imaging opens to the future. The imagination also provides a link outside of the community; its very nature leads it forth to make use of the images of society and to address society in terms of those images.

The local Christian community supports imaging by providing the safety or stability that allows the individual imagination to try out many different prospects. Imagination needs the ability to make mistakes. Some

moral argument will not work but people cannot discover that until someone tries to phrase or, more likely, to image the argument. Since imagination functions with images rather than with acts, it allows a freedom for exploration.

The local community provides not only the security to take the risk of imagining; it also gives the attitudes and material necessary to nourish the imagination. The community affords an environment that can allow and encourage its members to dream. Moreover, by featuring images and the arts, it supplies the materials for that dreaming. A community whose worship, for example, is rich and sensuous gives its members the incentive to combine those images into new ones. Storytellers and artists come from places where words, music, and images matter. The Catholic tradition has generally proven itself abundant in its use of the arts and the imagination. These came from local communities but found encouragement, too, in a sacramental theology which clings to the visible, which takes an understanding of the Incarnation into every aspect of church life.[8]

The ability to image the faith of the community in various situations deepens the community's moral sense. Much the same way that television, for example, allows us as a culture to try out different behaviors and personae vicariously, faith imaging allows the believer to see what would happen if some situation or other were to occur. This is very much a "fleshed-out" case study approach to moral discourse.

In order for the community to take its place as a moral communicator, people must identify with that community, finding it attractive and salient. This happens first at the local level when individuals experience the community's life. How can the Church become a better moral communicator? I would propose the deepening of all levels of the local community first: providing models of Christian living, teaching the Church's tradition, nourishing the imagination. Some argue that the best way to do these things comes through parish renewals; others, through a re-affirmation of the parochial school system. Both parish and school shape the individual; the Church should pay attention to both.[9]

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[8] William Lynch in *Images of Faith* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1973) explores the relationship between the images of the believing community and those of secular society: Faith images the world in particular ways, providing that Christian insight into moral action that I have described here. At the same time, secular society too has its images of faith which influence how it deals with the believing community.

[9] James R. Kelly, "Does the *Renew* Program Renew?" *America* 156:9 (March 7, 1987) 197-99; Andrew M. Greeley, "Community as Social Capital: James S. Coleman on Catholic Schools," *America* 157:5 (September 5, 1987) 110-12.

4. Church Universal and Local

This does not eliminate the universal Church or the hierarchical Church from the picture. Given the local situation, the larger Church offers a powerful focus for personal identification, compensating for weakness, and remembering the tradition independently of local circumstances—a sometimes necessary corrective. The larger Church can also provide resources unavailable to the local community. Think again of those papal Masses attended by thousands: The artistic tradition of the Church became evident there on a scale impossible for a parish. Think for a moment of the papal encyclicals or Vatican declarations: These reaffirm the teaching tradition of the Church in a transnational way that moves beyond individual cases to more general principles. Think for a moment of the calendar of saints: Here are models for every life. The parish community, then, does not stand alone but forms the particular locus for the Church as moral communicator. One cannot separate the church from the Church or the Church from the church.

At the same time one cannot separate the interpersonally experienced church from the mediated church. One can draw distinctions between formal and informal communication, as I have tried to do. However, in the lives of individuals, such distinctions soon become slippery. Each of the examples which began this chapter illustrated a particular kind of communication. The interpersonal examples of the catechist and the works of charity communicate something of the life of the Church in a way that nothing else can. The mediated cases illustrate other aspects of the Church as moral communicator. The American Bishops' pastoral letters—formal moral teaching, using the mass media—placed the Catholic Church in the United States squarely in the spotlight of a national policy debate. The bishops caught the public interest, not only of Catholics but of men and women of every kind of belief. Significantly, their method of proceeding (hearings, discussions, drafts) probably conveyed as powerful a message about the Church as did their conclusions.

In a similar way, the pilgrim Pope catches the imagination of the world. Whatever the messages and whatever the motivation of the crowds, people gather to express a celebration of the Church. This is the Church of the imagination; this is the Church which holds up models of holiness. This Church—whether experienced in person or through television—proves attractive to many, even those inactive in local parishes. The teaching Pope (the Pope of the encyclicals) proves less popular, probably because such teaching demands too much of its medium. A sound bite, even a 5,000 word story simply cannot summarize a moral argument.

This particular model of the Church as moral communicator poses some serious questions to the Church. I have already briefly indicated something of the consequences for the parish and for the universal Church: How does it become more perfectly Church, more a community of love, more a place that fosters models of behavior, a place that teaches the tradi-

tion, a place that is an environment for imaging? The other serious questions result from the fact that the Church is not the only community to which individuals belong. In a pluralist society like that of the United States, people have multiple memberships: families, work groups, neighborhoods, political affiliations, fan clubs, network loyalties, and so forth.[10] Each of these also provides images, models, and a tradition. How does one determine which images or models will shape people? Does exposure time accurately measure influence? Does brand loyalty have anything to say about religious practice? Ultimately, what determines what people take for granted? What constitutes an individual's or a society's moral universe? The same model which applies to the Church could well apply to these other communities as well. That model may help in an understanding of the communication patterns in our world and their influence in shaping a moral discourse.

This essay has proposed an outline for a model of the Church as a moral communicator. Formal and informal moral teaching and practice develop in radically different ways, but the Church encompasses both. Both formal and informal styles affect and are affected by the communication industry and its products. Perhaps this model will help us to understand a bit more clearly how some of the factors in the moral life interact so that we can more clearly express who we are and who we wish to be as a Church.

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[10] George Wilson, "Where Do We Belong? United States Jesuits and Their Memberships," *Studies in the Spirituality of Jesuits* 21:1 (January 1989).