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ARTICLE



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Transmission or ‘creative fidelity’? The institutional communicator’s role in the Church today

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ABSTRACT

The role of the institutional communicator in the Church today has a special relevance derived from the credibility crisis suffered by this institution. A greatly increased awareness to this theme leads to the discovery of profound and essential dimensions of this role, which are discussed in this article. The focus is on the credibility of the communicator, who, on one hand is called to take full responsibility for what he says, but on the other hand speaks in the name of and through a collective subject—the Church or one of its specific constituent parts—that doesn’t always receive much appreciation from its numerous audiences; it is actually often perceived to be “biased” as an institution, it is widely opposed and criticized. An in-depth analysis regarding the role of credibility from a sociological point of view is illustrated by the application of the three roles identified by Erving Goffman— animator, author and principal—to the figure of the institutional communicator, underlining his responsibilities as communication co-leader. A comparison with the concept of translator as a mediator illuminates other characteristics of the communicator, and functions as a basis to comment on some of the virtues (both personal and professional), which he must possess, enhancing both his credibility and efficiency. The application of the concept of creative fidelity (*fidélité créatrice*) from the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel, together with the interrelation between comprehension and exposition in a comprehensible manner (hermeneutics and creativity), highlights the necessity of reconsidering the importance of communication and of the communicator within the decision-making process.

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Introduction: the existential and professional crisis of the communicator in the Church today

He who is nowadays called to perform the role of communicator in the Church—whether from the responsibilities at a more central and top position, to the more

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marginal ones in the dioceses and in the parishes, in the organizations and in the ecclesiastical movements—often finds himself experiencing a condition of existential and professional hardship and frustration in the face of a growing mistrust and skepticism by the audience. He thus undergoes a *credibility crisis* that is collectively assailing both the Church and his role itself; his role is that of a subject who must uphold and promote the positions and the decisions of a ‘biased institution’, because that is the way the Church is perceived today, as a peculiar entity with peculiar interests.

Three ‘wounds’ are likely to undermine the image of the Catholic Church:

- a. Sexual abuse cases scandal, which endangers not only the credibility of the ecclesiastical personnel, but also the educational function of the Church itself towards the younger generations;
- b. The contradictory nature of the way the economic issue is sometimes dealt with: from the opulent image of the Church to the financial scandals that besiege it;
- c. The perception of an institution that abuses its power of influence over believers (over the conscience of the believers) and that, at the same time, seems overwhelmed by an increasing degree of mistrust and skepticism.

Therefore, communicators often find themselves dealing with a communication crisis, which, if it does not always have the nature of a head-to-head and obvious dispute, presents itself as an aura, an atmosphere of mistrust, of constant and pervasive disillusion.

Alongside these reasons that make the role of institutional communicators in the Church burdensome and exhausting, there is a fourth distressing element, which is a sense of ‘detachment’ from the Church’s community. The communicator is perceived as being a ‘speaking device’, someone who broadcasts with a low level of creativity what others elaborate, and who doesn’t experience a profound bond with the clergy (diocese, parish, association, movement) he represents, in the name of whom he speaks or writes.

If we dwell on this existential and professional perception of crisis and distress—which is certainly real and must neither be ignored nor underestimated—we become prisoners of a *frame* that drastically narrows the view and that eventually turns into repression. This is reflected in the frustrating experience of being engaged in something that does not correspond to one’s own personal vocation and that does not contribute to the self-realization of the individual.

The discourse must be set out adopting a more adequate frame that may provide an effective sense to the communicators’ role and action. This larger and more appropriate view develops into four dimensions linked to one another, restoring order in the job of the communicator, defining the hierarchy, the proper order of things. These are also the four points around which our discussion will be structured:

1. Rediscovering and reframing the bond between communication and Church;
2. Understanding the fundamentals in terms of credibility of the Church, as a communicator and communicating to the world;

3. Identifying, specifically, the characteristics of a credible institutional communicator and the ensemble of “virtues” constituting his credibility;
4. Proposing the reframing of the figure of the Church communicator.

1. The Christian event and communication of it

Communication is an inherent and constitutive dimension of the Christian event, the latter arising *from* an existing communication, and existing *for* a communication.

The Church encourages repeating everyday: ‘The angel of the Lord declared unto Mary’. Declaration is an essential word in the communication vocabulary and its main synonym is ‘news’. On Christmas Eve angels announce to the shepherds great news, the birth of the Savior, the Awaited. And this announcement finds its fulfillment into Resurrection. Even here, angels come with shocking news: ‘Why do you seek the living among the dead? He is not here, but has risen.’

This news might be synthesized into: the incarnated and risen God is here in history today, he is here among us. This news, as St. Paul says, represents the origin of our joy, in fact: ‘Rejoice always’ he exhorts us in the First Letter to the Thessalonians (5, 16) and, in the following letter to the Philippians, says again: ‘Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice’ because ‘The Lord is at hand!’ (Phil 4, 4–5).

The Christian event comes *from* a communication. God has communicated to man. However, communication does not only stand at the *origin* of the Christian event. It also constitutes its *goal*. The Gospel, which is the narration of the human history of Jesus, ends with the task: go, announce, baptize. Once again, we find the word announcement.

St. John, at the beginning of his first letter says: ‘That ... which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands ... we ... proclaim to you’ (1 Jn 1, 1–2). Moreover, St. Paul, in his letter to the Romans, explains this task with a series of questions, presenting a communication issue: ‘For, “every one who calls upon the name of the Lord will be saved.” But how are men to call upon him in whom they have not believed? And how are they to believe in him of whom they have never heard? And how are they to hear without a preacher?’ (Rom 10, 13–15).

The coming of Jesus Christ—which is the cornerstone of Christian faith—has three immediate implications: an existentialist, a cultural and a communicative implication.

1. The first is an existential implication, which belongs to all faiths, but finds its summit within Christianity, where it becomes more explicit and clearer. Reality, in its essential texture, is benevolent, reality is friendly. ‘The world or life or death or the present or the future, all are yours;’, St. Paul says (1 Cor. 3, 21–23).
2. The second is a cultural implication. Faith generates a culture, from an anthropological point of view; this is a different way of listening, of thinking and acting. In philosophical language we can speak of “horizon of meaning”, as Pope Francis does in *Evangelii Gaudium* (Pope Francis 2013, no. 49), echoing the words of Benedict XVI. A different look on the world, reality, ourselves, others, time.

3. The third is a communicative implication. Those who have encountered this event during their lives, making it personal, feel the necessity of sharing it with everyone. ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!’ St. Paul says (1 Cor 9,16). Therefore, the Church exists for one communication: faith and declaration are two sides of the same reality.

As the people of God on the road through history, the Church thus comes *from* this proclamation and exists *for* this proclamation. Therefore, whatever the Church is talking about, it should always talk about Christ. Pope Benedict XVI clarified it in his 2006 ‘Address to the Roman Curia at the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings’, (Pope Benedict XVI 2006): ‘The Church must speak of many things: of all the issues connected with the human being, of her own structure and of the way she is ordered and so forth. But her true and—under various aspects—only theme is ‘God’. Moreover, the great problem of the West is forgetfulness of God. This forgetfulness is spreading. In short, all the individual problems can be traced back to this question’. In addition, the God of Christians is an incarnated, dead and resurrected God, so believing in this God means proclaiming his Resurrection.

This event presents two complementary aspects, even from a communicative point of view, for everyone to be aware of.

The first aspect is that this news cannot but profoundly divide the recipients. It leads them to assume two radically different approaches. It is the same situation which the Roman attorney of Judea, Porcius Festus (Act 25, 18–20), found himself dealing with in the moment he was called to settle an incomprehensible dispute within a group of Israelites, who were declaring the death of a certain Jesus of Nazareth, while Paul of Tarsus was claiming that he was still alive. This radical ‘standpoint’ always existed in history, but comes back overwhelmingly today, when Christianity no longer takes part in a shared culture, and is taken for granted by numerous Western societies. The ultimate stumbling block remains the resurrection of Christ, which for non-believers represents a greater imposture, the biggest *fake news* in history, while on the other hand by believers it is seen not only as an ‘event’ that really happened, but more as the principle of any fact and truth. It is possible to either sugarcoat or even ignore this fact, but it still remains an ineradicable premise about any communicative relationship between those who believe and those who do not. It is an issue hard to put in brackets, considered that in its presence, even the most forgiving attitude towards the Church in the best-case scenario is based on the thesis that James G. Frazer presents in *The Devil’s Advocate* (1927), according to which religions, precisely thanks to their misconceptions, produce rules—mostly prohibitions and taboos—which happen to have positive effects on life in society.

The second aspect is that this news, together with its unspoken ramifications, has a unique nature. It pretends indeed to do away with the inexorable law of information stated by the great German sociologist Niklas Luhmann, according to whom every piece of news, when learned and reported, loses its novelty, ceases to be such, than takes its place in the background of the already known, of the things that are not-the-news anymore (Luhmann 2000 [1996], chap. 3). The announcement of which the Church is bearer, always presents a *surprising* and *incredible* character instead, and

refuses to flatten on the crystalized background of the known. It is not possible to ‘get used’ of the idea of a man (mortal, like everyone else) being resurrected and still alive today.

If, then, the Church exists for this communicative purpose, it cannot therefore define the outcomes of its own communication. The *communication* of faith or the *transmission* of faith, that is the faith within the *reality* of that event, is an outcome, an effect that remains totally outside the power of the communicator.

This aspect may be a source of anguish or discouragement, if we consider the lack of proportion of the task and the limits of the communicator, but can be a source of a surprising self-confidence and courage. In *Evangelii Gaudium* Pope Francis recalls the parable of the seed, which, once it has been sown, grows whether the farmer remains awake or not (Pope Francis 2013, no. 22; Mark 4: 26–29). This does not exempt Christians from the task of making a contribution to this work, but it sets them free by its outcome, because the advance of the Kingdom through history is Somebody Else’s work.

2. The credibility of the Church and its communication

Although communication is an event constantly exposed to numerous risks, there is, however, an essential condition that the receiver of the message places upon the one who proclaims it: the *credibility* of the speaker. The Church cannot determine the outcome of its message, but it is responsible for its own *credibility* in speaking the message.

Credibility is a *relation*, and as such, depends on three factors: (a) the characteristics of the speaker, because each communication, whatever its content, is always a ‘presentation’ of the one who is speaking: in each thing that is said, something personal is always actually communicated; (b) the characteristics of the listener, from what he expects and awaits, but also his prejudices and resistance; (c) the context in which communication takes place. A context that appears profoundly changed today.

It is worth briefly thinking about context, the third factor. As observed by a great sociologist of religion, Peter Berger, the conditions of faith communication today resemble those of the first Christians living in the Greek-Roman world, a social context characterized by an intense pluralism, in which ‘Christian faith was possible only as a deliberate act of choice’ (Berger 2004, IX). According to this aspect, our situation is similar to Paul’s, when he preached in the Athenian Agorà, where a multitude of gods were competing with each other. Despite similarities, there is an important difference: the first Christian generation lived absorbed in a society in which the religious dimension was a part of life, much more so than in the world today, given that modernity has gradually weakened ‘the social environments which support taken-for-grantedness, in religion as in everything else that people believe’. In the same context, ‘the individual is increasingly confronted with many different beliefs, values, and lifestyles, and is therefore forced to choose between them’ (4). This also applies to Christian faith, which is no longer integrated—or much less than before—as part of the cultural environment and shared ethos, but goes back to being a personal issue, a matter of personal commitment.

Benedict XVI highlighted this aspect in the Apostolic Letter ‘*Porta fidei*’, by which he announced the year of faith 2012: ‘whereas in the past was possible to recognize a unitary cultural matrix, broadly accepted in its appeal to the content of the faith and the values inspired by it, today this no longer seems to be the case in large swathes of society, because of a profound crisis of the faith that has affected many people’ (Pope Benedict XVI 2011). Even more radically, Pope Francis, in the Address to the Roman Curia at the Traditional Exchange of Christmas Greetings in 2019, acknowledged that ‘today we are no longer the only ones who create culture, nor are we in the forefront of the most listened to. We need a change in our pastoral mindset, which does not mean moving towards a relativistic pastoral care. We are no longer living in a Christian world, because faith—especially in Europe, but also in a large part of the West—is no longer an evident presupposition of social life; indeed faith is often rejected, derided, marginalized and ridiculed’. Therefore, according to Francis, a paradigm shift in communication is necessary, because we have moved from ‘when it was easier to distinguish between two rather well-defined realities: a Christian world and a world yet to be evangelized. That situation no longer exists today. People who have not yet received the Gospel message do not live only in non-Western continents; they live anywhere, particularly in vast urban concentrations that call for a specific pastoral outreach. In big cities, we need other ‘maps’, other paradigms, which can help us reposition our ways of thinking and our attitudes. Brother and Sisters Christendom no longer exists!’ (Pope Francis 2019).

The estrangement from Christian faith of most of our contemporaries, is not, however, part of an inevitable process, a sort of ‘spiritual destiny’ of our times linked to the emergence of skeptic and nihilistic philosophies and to the domination of science and technology, but, as noted by the German philosopher Hans Joas (Joas 2012; Spaemann and Joas 2019), is also the outcome of cultural phases, concrete decisions and mistakes involving the Church, as a ‘bourgeoning process of faith, but even more the frequent alliance with the powerful, the privileged, the warmongers’. In conclusion, ‘secularization is also a story of the guilt of Christians’ (Spaemann and Joas 2019, 79).

In this context, where does the Church’s credibility come from? In a general sense, the credibility of the Church has three major roots, three great sources.

1. The credibility of the Church is primarily based on its history (first root). In this case, we can talk about credibility deriving from tradition. At its origins, there is the proclamation itself of the resurrection of Christ, the event on account of which a group of discouraged and disappointed disciples, a few days after his death, started to proclaim triumphantly to the world that he was back and that he was amongst them. However, it includes the whole path of the Church through history, whose common thread is that “chain of credibility” which renewed the announcement from one generation to another until today. It is the history of the Church through the centuries, starting from the first community in Jerusalem to this day, with all the richness, but also with the struggle, the contradictions and the faults that marked this path. A tradition that unites, but also divides, that constantly needs to be discovered within its treasure and authenticity without falling victim to prejudices and reductionisms it may be subjected to, but

also unafraid of owning up to the faults and to the limits produced by the historical setting and the inborn weakness of mankind.

2. Legitimacy deriving from tradition and history is not enough, since tradition is similar to language: it must be spoken, renewed by daily use in the present (second root). The credibility of the Church is at stake and updated through the capability of giving an answer *today* to its purpose, within the ability of announcing Christ to man today and proposing oneself as “master of humanity”. ‘There’s the need for a new language, maybe even ancient words but always new, reviving hope and strengthening the will to believe in a more equal and fraternal world’ (Pasqualetti 2018, 233). This is why there is the need for what the French philosopher Gabriel Marcel (1946) called ‘creative fidelity’. Fidelity to a profound bequest of the Christian event in which we are immersed, but also the ability to express with new words, existentially and culturally persuasive for man today, the announcement of such an event and its engagement within the human condition. This is again the time for announcement, as Benedict XVI and Francis recalled, because to many people Christ is a stranger by now or because his figure has faded into a flimsy myth or a distant nostalgia. But Christ can only be known and encountered through the relationship with a ‘credible witness’. The men of our time, Paul VI said, do not believe in teachers, but in witnesses. The comprehension and embracing of the message of faith on the part of the recipient is entirely left to his own freedom, but the witness has responsibility towards the message he is bearing. He is required to make it understandable and worthy of esteem as much as possible.
3. In the end, the credibility of the Church manifests itself and becomes visible within some significant figures embodying and interpreting in the most authentic way the purpose and the method of Christian life (third root). Throughout the history of the Church these are, above all, the figures of saints and, today, of those that have a greater ecclesiastic responsibility or that bear a charisma capable of giving life to new forms of experience and ecclesial aggregations, social activities inspired by charity or specific cultural tasks in the sign of Christian faith. However, in the proper dynamics of the Christian announcement, every believer may represent a reliable witness within his life context and to the people he is connected with.

Since the Church today stands as an extensive, articulated and complex social structure, having at the same time the characteristics of the community, the association and the institution (a long consideration could be made on each of these characteristics), it communicates at various levels and in different ways:

- a. First, it communicates centrally and at an apical level (the ‘maximum representation’ of the Church) by having large events and documents. Let us think about the Second Vatican Council, the great Papal Encyclicals or even the speeches of the pontiffs in major international fora, such as the UN, UNESCO or the European Parliament. It also communicates through large events, as the Canonizations of Pope John Paul II, John XXIII or Mother Teresa of Calcutta,

World Youth Days, World Meetings of Families (de la Cierva, Black, and O'Reilly 2016). But we can also consider new forms of communication allowed by the new global media environment, such as the video message by Pope Francis on the occasion of the Superbowl in Huston (2017) or the video talk at TED (Technology Entertainment Design, Vancouver 2017) dedicated to the topic of 'The Future You' (about the 'philosophy' of communication by Pope Francis, cfr. Viganò 2016). These are all forms, albeit very different amongst each other, through which the Church communicates not only to the audience of the faithful, but even to a much wider audience on a global scale, as well as to other institutions.

- b. In the second place, the Church speaks and acts through its branches and community-based organizations: the Episcopal Conferences, the dioceses, the movements and associations, the parishes, that is, through the records, the speeches and the actions of these entities, which are varied but more or less linked and coordinated among themselves. This is the widespread structure through which the Church is capable of reaching individual persons, connected to the different cultures and local traditions, and to the peculiarities of the local contexts.
- c. Thirdly, each single Christian is a communicator in the work place, in school, in the family, in the places where politics happen and where culture is made. Everyone is individually the face and the voice of the Church and is personally responsible for its communication. In this context, for example, every priest becomes a communicator whenever he gives a homily, when he teaches catechism to the youth or holds a class for couples, when he organizes a celebration or has dinner with a family. In addition, every lay member of the faithful has a communicative responsibility towards the social environment in which he lives and acts: his own family, his workplace, the school where he teaches or learns, his peer group.
- d. In the end, there are people who, according to a specific talent and specific professional skills, find themselves being accredited and 'institutional' communicators of these ecclesiastical realities, from the most apical and central to the local and peripheral ones. They are then appointed to a peculiar responsibility, they represent a link between the Church, within its various branches, and the external world, the world of semi-believers and non-believers. The specific role of the institutional communicator stands within the building of a *framing* of the Church communication, making the communication particularly clear, attractive and persuasive.

The rich and heterogeneous communicative technique of the Church itself, which is organized only in part by its center (and that could not be entirely coordinated by the center, even if in the Catholic Church there is a hierarchical structure), often raises serious communication issues. Voices can be consonant or dissonant. They can mutually corroborate and strengthen in offering a single image and a homogeneous interpretation of events, but they can also come into conflict, deny and delegitimize each other. This threat is greater with globalization, because today any declaration or communicative action that happens in a remote diocese can enter the media network and become

viral (for better or for worse) which goes a good deal beyond the local context where it first originated. The Church, within all its diverse expressions and branches, must become ever more keenly aware with regard to these potentialities and risks of communication. However, this is specifically requested of those fulfilling this task and this role: the ‘institutional’ communicators of the Church.

They have to know indeed how to manage and organize efficiently both self-produced and produced-by-others communication (Mancini 1996). Self-produced communication uses specific tools such as printing and publishing, radio and TV, and online websites arising within the ecclesial experience, and directly or indirectly refers to and is an expression of ecclesial realities. The produced-by-others communication refers rather to ‘external’ media, which the institutional communicator must get involved with in order to deliver his message to a wider audience. Here, of course, there is the chance to gain more room for manoeuvre within communication and influence, but there also are risks that mediation and the filter of an ‘external’ medium and its professionals, with their particular logic, might produce a distortion or a reduction of the original message (Gili and Nardella 2019).

Finally, the complexity and the difficulty in communicative action by the Church is also the result of the same characteristics acquired by the public to which this communication is addressed. From a conceptual point of view, but also a practical one, it becomes increasingly difficult to make a clear distinction between believers and non-believers. To whom does the Church address herself? And whom do the institutional communicators address? What are the ‘targets’? Is it possible to make a distinction between an ‘internal’ and ‘external’ audience, as in the case of companies or public administrations? Is it possible to restart with clear categories (and to conceive specific messages for) the believers active in parishes, associations and movements, for the regular believers at the Sunday mass, for the occasional visitors, for the sympathizers, for the unsympathetic, for the agnostics, for the atheists? Is it necessary to build dedicated speeches about selected categories of audience, favoring those presenting a certain degree of ‘homophily’ towards the communicator, or would it be necessary to talk to everyone, without distinction, with the same communicative intentions and the same language?

A profound change in the recipients also contributes to making this relationship with the public, actually the ‘publics’, even more complex. Today, much more than before, the recipients of the message, thanks to the use of social media, insert themselves within these communicative mass processes, succeeding on the one hand in establishing themselves as active spokespersons on behalf of those in the message production sector, and on the other hand co-defining the characteristics of the public space where the messages concerning religion must circulate or, at least, defining some of the parameters (e.g. concerning the aesthetics) that it must comply with. In this respect, the recipients not only bring up personal queries by weighing up their freedom of choice and their right to customize the received messages, but they even undermine the content, customizing it according to their own criteria and attributions of meaning (Narbona 2016; Boccia Artieri and La Rocca 2019). The center of personal independence acquires a greater importance, hence the recipients—even the ‘closest’ ones and those integrated within the ecclesial institution—carry out a negotiating process about

the significance to be attributed to the events and their protagonists (starting from the Pope), often depriving them of any degree of holiness and sometimes minimizing them, changing in this way even the mechanisms aimed at giving an identification of the ecclesial institution.

3. Features of a credible translator and the complex of “virtues” composing his credibility

At this point, our analysis concentrates on the task (the ministry) and the (professional) role of the “institutional communicator” of the Church. To better understand the structure of such purpose we can refer to the analysis of the different roles of the speaker or the broadcaster developed by the sociologist Erving Goffman (1981).

Analyzing the internal structure of the speaker or broadcaster, as suggested by Goffman, we can find at least three different roles. The first is the *animator*, the person who, in concrete terms, physically communicates, transmits a message. In the case of an individual person, the animator will have a peculiar expressive equipment: a certain physical appearance, a particular expressiveness, a verbal and non-verbal communication style.

The second role is the *author*. The author is the creator and manufacturer of the message. When a husband tells his wife “I love you”, he is the animator of the communication and the author as well, since what he says matches with what he feels and thinks. In communication, though, a subject may report somebody else’s thought. In such case, he will be the animator but not the (original) author. Actually, on reflecting further, even in reporting somebody else’s thought we never act as simple animators. Interpreting another person’s thought and intentions, we always share some of the role and character of the author, becoming somehow co-author of the communication, since we translate or reintroduce certain ideas and notions using our words, giving them “our” shape. That is what happens to the spokesperson; he is not a mere executor, but somehow co-author of what he communicates, always interpreting, translating, and adapting the original thinking of another (person, organization or institution) to a particular situation.

The third role is the *principal*, the person, group or institution in whose name you speak, on whose behalf you speak and who takes responsibility (this is the word we are interested in) for what is said. Every conscious communication implies responsibility on the part of someone. The same concrete subject can be the animator, the author and the principal of communication. However, the three roles can also be separated and distributed among different subjects. In an advertisement, for example, there is an animator, that is the actor or the *testimonial*, seen by the audience; there is an author, acknowledged by the advertising agency that conceived the message; then there is the principal, that is the firm which commissioned the advertisement and that must be expressly appointed. The actors, the agency and the company are all broadcasters with all different roles and functions though.

This tripartite division of roles and functions of the issuer is important in the name of a consideration about the responsibility in/of the communication because it shows that any message always implies the responsibility of the person who issues it or of

someone else in the name of and on behalf of whom it is uttered. An essential part of our discussion shall be necessarily indicated: when a person becomes part of a group, of an organization or an institution, his communicative acts do not involve *just* his individual responsibility, but even the image and the reputation of the whole group which he belongs to and represents (and conversely, the positive or negative image of the group or the organization is also reflected onto him).

According to Goffman's model, it is necessary to observe that the communicating individual subject, and even more if he has an official and acknowledged role, is consequently not the sole issuer of his own communication, but always somehow includes as principal the group, the community, the organization or institution of which he is a member and in the name of which he speaks. At the same time, however, he is also the author and principal of the communication, because through his communicative action he puts his personal responsibility at stake, ready to commit himself in what he does.

Our consideration must now better define the nature of this responsibility. That means generally identifying the characteristics of a reliable communicator, fully responsible and creative in fulfilling the job that his community—either small or large, central or peripheral—assigns him.

Basically, an interlocutor or an audience recognizes the credibility of a communicator according to five characteristics (Gili 2005):

1. A first characteristic is the perception of the *integrity* of the communicator by the recipient. A man is considered credible who is honest, sincere, coherent, serious, who maintains his promises, who is loyal to his commitments. In the professional field, integrity is defined by specific ethical standards, that is by the rules dictated by morality within the role, according to characterizing social expectations. There is also another fundamental aspect regarding the integrity of a communicator, which Goffman (1981, ch. 1) always calls 'self-identification' within the role. Identification applies when there is conviction in the role that is being played; when there is a correspondence to one's deepest motivations and it contributes to personal fulfillment (the term 'vocation' may be used as well). Therefore, the commitment of the (professional) communicator is perceived as a significant dimension of one's self identity, rather than as an external part largely adopted on the basis of external purposes, such as prestige, esteem, economic remuneration. In this respect, the communicator is the one who first believes in what he says, seriously confronting and accepting it.
2. A second characteristic about credibility is *disinterestedness*. The lack of a specific interest enhances the credibility of the communicator. Within interpersonal relations, we believe people more when they are telling us something selflessly or even against their own interest. This has a tremendous implication for a professional communicator. It means dealing with even unpleasant matters, those potentially constituting a threat to the image of the group or the organization that he belongs to, without eluding those matters or offering a partial or tamed representation of them. Let us consider themes like pedophilia, economic and financial scandals or news of rivalry between parties and groups within the Church. In this sense, credibility goes to the one who is not scared of telling the

truth, even when it may not be pleasing. However, this also requires a distinctive degree of intelligence (or ‘charity’). In fact, not only lying or omitting, but also even telling the truth may represent a form of violence. There are ways of telling the truth that are worse than deception or falsehood, when they show no respect for the people involved in the narrated events, including not only the victims but also the accused or even the guilty.

3. The aspect of disinterest is closely linked to the one of *independence*. That means not only that the communicator must not have an interest ‘of his own’ at the expense of the interlocutor, but neither should he become an instrument of defending a third-party’s ‘points of view’, interests and advantages. In this case, it is possible to think of the interest or the particular point of view of an internal party within the Church. Undoubtedly many media—this is definitely a great asset—are designed based on the experience and the charisma of certain associations, movements or local realities, representing the many ‘ways’ of the Church, through which people can meet Christ. But these means cannot become amplifiers of standpoints in which the distinctive perspective of a given path imposes itself over the unity and the concerns of the universal Church.
4. A fourth characteristic is *spontaneity*: a communicator’s credibility is enhanced if the audience perceives that he is not trying to influence them. This is the idea of an unbuilt credibility, not wisely planned according to the most appropriate and effective ways and forms, that influences the public. This does not mean rejecting *a priori* the use of the art of argumentation and rhetoric, since ‘good language can be the best suit of a good thought’ (Gil 2016, 94) and not simply a gimmick to cover the absence of thought or deceptive thoughts. Rather, it means avoiding reshaping the message according to the audience or particular segments of the audience by adopting a purely mimetic strategy, a sought-after resemblance to the audience in order to ingratiate oneself with them (Jones and Wortman 1973).
5. A final character of credibility, to which sometimes little attention is paid, is *prudence*. Credibility is not only a personal or intrinsic characteristic of the communicator, but a ‘construction’, even a strenuous one, realized, recognized, negotiated, bargained for in social relations, requiring constant attention, conscious self-control. Managing a medium that addresses many people implies greater responsibility, because if ‘perverse effects’ are produced in communication, these have a magnitude that goes far beyond what can happen in interpersonal or group relationships. As mentioned earlier, the globalization of the media and the Internet potentially offer an extraordinary amplification even to isolated and peripheral voices. In such way a ‘wrong’ speech, statement or performance, taking place in a small television, radio, newspaper or site in any remote corner of the planet, the next day may have gone around the world. For this reason, it is necessary that anxiety for attention-seeking, stupidity and naivety do not result in discredit for either the local community, nor for the whole Church.

4. The communicator as mediator

From the previous discourse emerges the need to reflect on the responsibility of the institutional communicator, especially because of his close relationship with the essential function of the Church: to communicate the message of Christ and not personal taste or interest. As observed, the communicator of the Church brings together in himself the roles of animator, author and, to a certain extent, principal. This set of roles characterizes his special responsibility, as well as the responsibility of the institution towards its communicator, to succeed in giving this profession the level and importance it deserves. In this last part of our reflection, we want to deepen this dimension of the communicator and thus reconsider his professional profile.

To better address the concept of communicator's responsibility, it is useful to closely observe the role of the communicator as a mediator between different cultures, mentalities and media, making use—given the affinity—of some approaches used in Translation Studies. The concepts of both written (translation) and oral (interpretation) versions help to deepen the various aspects of the mediator.

Comparing the figure of the translator as such, Gadamer, in his classic essay 'Man and Language', *Mensch und Sprache* (1993 [1966]), had already pointed out that every translator is at the same time an author, i.e. not a copyist of a text from one source language to another, but a writer, who uses the target language to express what really constitutes the meaning of the original. The Brazilian poet and translator Haroldo de Campos (1929–2003), unfortunately not very well known in Europe, coined the term 'Transcreation' (Transcrição) for 'captar a "vibração" do original no seu eu' (Campos 1983, 241), 'capturing the vibration of the original inside oneself; that is, the translator has the responsibility to *re-do*, *re-create*, a text into another language and culture. We can compare it to what Aristotle in his *Poetics* (ch. 4) calls *mimesis*, which is not a simple imitation, but a new creation, a new work of art. Quintilian expresses its rhetorical counterpart with the concept of *imitatio*. The good rhetorician seeks the *vim dicendi atque inventionis* (*Institutionis Oratoriae* X 2, 16 and following), he wants to make his own the power of expression and invention that he finds in the model to imitate, and he does so with his own art and creativity (cf. Gil 2012).

In modern Translation Studies (e.g. Kohlmayer 2019) the importance of studying the personality of the translator, his subjectivity and individuality (which leaves traces of his biography in the translated text) is emphasized (Kohlmayer 2019, 15–19). Compared to the more creative translation, i.e. literary translation, Kohlmayer (2019, 55) argues that any version in another language is a compromise between the original text and what would be original in the target language. We can add, paraphrasing Watzlawick's famous phrase ('you can't not communicate'), 'you can't not interpret', thus highlighting the translator-communicator's responsibility for his decisions. For such reason we observe a relationship between translation and musical interpretation (see Gil 2015, 149ff.), which adapts each version of the original to the current situation and culture of the listeners.

However, a more careful consideration of the concept of 'interpreter', used to name the person performing simultaneous or consecutive oral translation, adds further value to the communicator-translator comparison. On one hand, the translator's interpretation work is even stronger in the oral version, because it is not possible either

simultaneously or consecutively to repeat the text of the broadcaster word by word (the immediacy and singularity of the communicative situation do not allow this). On the other hand, the concept of interpreter acquires the value of mediator, or rather intercessor. The German term for interpreter, *Dolmetscher*, is a word of Turkish origin—*dilmaç*—used to designate the person who diplomatically tried to resolve conflicts between different parties, not only because he knew both languages and cultures well, but also because he possessed the qualities of mediator, or rather intercessor. The comparison of the *Dolmetscher* with the communicator sheds new light on this profession, because it is a question of harmonizing fidelity to the principal with one's own creativity, which in a certain way also makes the interpreter a principal.

Philosophically speaking, it is possible to examine this fidelity-creativity relation with the already mentioned concept of creative fidelity (*la fidélité créatrice*) by Gabriel Marcel (1889–1973). The French philosopher (Marcel 1946, 186ff.) operates a subtle distinction between *témoin* and *spectateur*, depending on the involvement of the spectator within the phenomenon. While the mere spectator (*spectateur*) is not actively involved, the witness (*témoin*) feels bound to some degree of commitment (*lié à une certaine fidélité*), which at the same time results in being enlightening, such that (Marcel 1946, 188) witnessing implies allegiance to a light (*le témoignage implique une fidélité à une lumière*). This dynamic understanding of fidelity is precisely what Marcel calls *fidélité créatrice*. As Parain-Vial et al. (1982) clarifies in Gabriel Marcel's philosophical dictionary under the heading *Fidélité*, Gabriel Marcel, through this dimension of free will, rather of love, overcomes some shared dichotomies in the capacity of knowledge, how to preserve/create, since loving consciousness is alive and in constant evolution. Conservation is so achieved through creation: Marcel talks about the *idée d'une fidélité créatrice, d'une fidélité qui ne sauvegarde qu'en créant* (252). Fidelity and witness combine here, so that the true nature of fidelity consists in being a *témoignage*, a witness (254).

For the Church communicator, this unity of being faithful and being creative means that his fidelity is not a mechanical repetition of rules or decisions of the administration, but an involvement in the spirit of the institution in order to make it his own and at the same time to make it understandable to others both within and outside the Church, assuming the responsibility implied by this creative fidelity.

5. The mediator as a person and his proper characteristics

Only the human person can be responsible. Responsibility is not an acquired or practiced skill, but the regular attitude of a responsible person, just as if the credibility of an institution was based on credible persons and could only be recovered through them. For these obvious reasons, it would be useful now to ask whether there are any known persons who can be of use as a reference point for the development of a model of the responsible communicator. We have twenty testimonies concerning a communicator known throughout the world, Joaquín Navarro Valls, collected by his brother Rafael (Navarro-Valls 2019), which highlight the fundamental closeness of the communicator to the *Dolmetscher*, for example when a witness (74) points out that Joaquín

Navarro Valls, who became spokesman for John Paul II, began to have diplomatic mediation duties (see the Beijing or Cairo conferences).

The evocation of the figure of Navarro-Valls allows us to understand how the general characteristics of a reliable communicator (which we have identified above, in chapter 3) can be ‘embodied’ in the concrete figure of an institutional communicator. Navarro-Valls did not do the job of communicator, but he was a communicator, i.e. he lived the virtues of the communicator, according to the Aristotelian concept of virtue (*Nicomachean Ethics* 1106a) as a state of being, according to which man becomes good and thereby fulfils his function well.

From the reading of this book is possible to notice three virtues belonging to the communicator-mediator Joaquín Navarro-Valls: courage, authenticity and magnanimity. We believe that these virtues, which were not defined abstractly but taken from the stories of those close to him, can also be used in order to better delineate the image of the responsible communicator. Let us have a look at them in a little more detail.

1. *Courage*. Being courageous for our spokesman meant above all addressing problems (Navarro-Valls 2019, 144ff.) and not closing his eyes when they were particularly uncomfortable. This attitude was leading internally to a degree of institutional rebellion, in his case by the Curia, while on the outside it was useful for him to communicate things as they really were, avoiding misunderstandings. From his perspective, it was clear that criticism meant that what he had said was well understood (152ff.). This form of being a communicator gave him the reputation of being a great professional (99).
2. *Authenticity*. When asked whether a communicator of the Church could be a person without faith, Navarro-Valls answered with his authenticity in living the unity of profession and faith, which involved in his person the union between tradition and modernity (81). He was a true Christian, but in the exercise of his profession he did not fall into the temptation of proselytism, therefore the media considered him very seriously (152ff.). With this attitude it is possible to be a servant of the Church (121), that is, a loyal person (21), and at the same time so transparent as to gain credibility, since the media are aware of who they are dealing with.
3. *Magnanimity*. People with a big heart are in the first place true companions of their friends, and they do not merely look for connections to cultivate for their work. All the testimonies collected are about their friendship with Navarro-Valls, regardless of whether they agree with him, whether they have other professions of faith or no faith at all. A big heart is noticeable especially when the other one suffers from some strong discomfort and the friend is standing next to him. However, a big heart will always be big in every possible way. About Navarro-Valls one can underline his enormous capacity for work (144ff.), the fact that he always took the initiative of information (152ff.), his good humour (21) and the desire to constantly increase his cultural formation (121).

We can therefore recap by saying that the communicator as a mediator is a witness. And it is because of this involvement that he is able to fully understand the content of

faith and of the institutional decisions to be communicated. As the Italian personalist philosopher Luigi Pareyson (1918–1991) said in an interview with Marisa Serra in *Studi Cattolici*, n. 193 (March 1977), to actually know the truth is not feasible without committing oneself, taking a position and exposing oneself personally (cf. Burgos 2000, 100ff.). Nevertheless, we do not own the truth, the truth owns us. And this event makes the communion between people seeking together the truth of things, of facts, of news possible. Ironically, this submission to reality gives the communicator that independence which also guarantees his credibility.

From the perspective of the institution, in our case an ecclesiastical institution, this means involving communication in the decision-making process. Father Federico Lombardi, in his testimony to his predecessor (Navarro-Valls 2019, 92), underlines that decisions today cannot be considered outside of their communication process. The focus on communication must be part of every government policy from the very beginning, and still more for a Magisterium that wants to be effective and farsighted.

These clarifications in understanding the concept of communicator go hand in hand with a growth in responsibility: from a simple executor— animator—or, at most, author of a statement, he becomes to ‘co-principal’ of the decisions to be communicated. And this is the responsibility that we will examine later in more detail.

6. Responsibility in communication as an intermediary

In every professional activity, the prestige of the job grows alongside the degree of responsibility. As we have already seen, the communicator is not simply a repeater of the text of a decision taken by the leadership (even ecclesiastical), but the interpreter, as well as the witness, involved in the deepest sense of the message and in the task of translating it faithfully and adapting it adequately to the best receptivity of its interlocutors. And it is precisely this relationship between hermeneutics and creativity that provides the profession of communicator with a high degree of responsibility, which is worth investigating not only from the point of view of the communicator, but also from the point of view of the institution for which he or she works, asking whether this profession enjoys the status that corresponds to it, given its high degree of responsibility.

Like any virtue, responsibility becomes is acquired through practice, that is, through the act of being responsible. In our case, we are talking about a communicative act, so we will focus on responsibility in communication as mediation. From Vergani’s detailed book (2015), we can extract some elements of this specific form of responsibility: its double aspect—responding to oneself, responding to the other—already shows its communicative dimension, in which one negative and one positive aspect can be distinguished. The number one harmful element is bureaucratization and the consequent hetero-direction (34, 37), which generate irresponsibility and conformism (the interlocutor is no longer a ‘You’ to be answered). An incentive element of responsibility is trust: ‘A trust-based relationship demands accountability (...) being responsible means committing oneself to a trust-based relationship’ (128). This trust is enhanced if given in advance, because this way it develops independently and becomes more effective.

For this reason, the development of responsibility is combined with the potential to fulfil oneself (92), and it is thus an openness to the other, to which one responds. In Vergani's explanation there are echoes of Dialogical Philosophy, e.g. by Martin Buber, especially when the Italian philosopher shows the personalist dimension of responsibility: 'responsibility (...) constitutes the very ipseity of the person, the very possibility of being able to say 'I', and (...) this ultimate possibility is such because the 'I' is open to another' (125ff.). In fact, in Buber's classic treatise ([1923] 1983, 12) *Ich und Du* [*You and I*] we find the well-known phrase '*Ich werde am Du; Ich werdend spreche ich Du*' ['I become I in You; becoming I say You'], that is, identity develops through relationality. The most intense form of the relationship, i.e. love, is not a matter of feelings but, as Buber states (15), the ego's responsibility for the You ('*Liebe ist Verantwortung eines Ich für ein Du*'). And so Buber (43) distinguishes between 'the automated state' (*der automatisierte Staat*) and 'the community of love' (*die Liebesgemeinde*), which is not an exchange of feelings, but arises from two elements: from a center of common values and the consequent relationship between the bearers of these values.

This combination of relationality and responsibility can be found in the modern concept of relational thought by Pier Paolo Donati (2008, 100ff.). The relationship between common values and its bearers acquires a precise profile in its model: a reasonable relationship is based on symbolic elements of value, which themselves support the norms of human behavior; these norms make use of instruments designed for the achievement of concrete goals. The path of relational thought—and this is Donati's innovative feature—does not derive only from the consensus of the members of a society, but also from its differences. The responsibility of the communicator is therefore based on his task of making differences not only compatible but also synergic (cf. 89).

These differences may occur between the communicator and some person responsible for his or her institution, as well as between the message of the institution and the expectations of the press or the public in general. From the point of view of relational thought (cf. Donati 118) and Dialogical Philosophy, recognizing alterity means entering into a circuit of gift, because one starts from the fact that others have a right to their differences. A relational thought attempts to understand the reasons for these differences, to enhance them and not to suppress them (cf. 93–95). In this way, not only does the relationship become transparent and credible, but also the communicator himself grows into a sense of responsibility, because it attempts to make comprehensible—to translate—the messages of the institution, which he faithfully interprets through a communicative creativity towards people of different mindsets and environments.

This relationship between hermeneutics and creativity, which has already been explored for some time in German research (cf. hermeneutik-und-kreativitaet.de), provides the communicator of the Church with a personality that turns him into a reliable partner, not *even if*, but *precisely because* he is a spokesperson for a principal with a specific identity and profile. The communicator becomes a credible 'co-principal' thanks to the transparency of the correspondence between his convictions and his words, between the values he represents and his coherent lifestyle, and finally between his faithful hermeneutics and the creative closeness to the addressees of his message.

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