Trinity and Communications: The Mystery and Task of Self-Communication

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For some years now, there has been a growing recognition of the important interface between theology and communications. The purpose of these reflections is to ask what the doctrine of the Trinity can contribute to a theology of communications. Perhaps it seems a rather peculiar topic: Trinity and communications. The Church’s interest in communications is certainly not new. Nonetheless, Vatican II saw that the world stood at the threshold of a new era in communications technology and recognized its significance, urgency and challenge for the life and mission of the Church. Basic concerns and fundamental principles to inform Christian consciousness regarding the media and their use were sketched out first Inter Mirificia and subsequently in Communio et Progressio.

But what does the doctrine of the Trinity, which has long seemed quietly irrelevant to most Christians, have to do with something as technologically and ethically challenging as the new age of communications in which we are living? The interpretation of divine revelation or salvation as God’s self-communication, often associated with Karl Rahner, has become commonplace in Catholic theology and was even adopted by Vatican II in Dei Verbum. Inasmuch as the doctrine of the Trinity is a short expression for the mystery of God’s saving self-communication, I suppose the connection suggests itself naturally enough. Indeed, in one of the opening paragraphs of Communio et Progressio we find the Trinity explicitly mentioned:

In the Christian faith, the unity and brotherhood of man are the chief aims of all communication and these find their source and model

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in the central mystery of the eternal communion between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who live a single divine life (CP 8).

A few paragraphs later the document speaks of God’s self-communication to humanity and says that

[f]rom that moment, communication among men found its highest ideal and supreme example in God who had become man and brother (CP 10).

Finally, it speaks of Christ,

who communicated to us his life-giving Spirit, who brings all men together in unity (CP 11).

**A Few Preliminary Remarks**

First, some observations and a confession. It seems to me that the connection that these texts make between the saving action of God in Jesus and in the Spirit and the possibility of a universal community of love among men and women, is the central, indisputable “point” of the doctrine of the Trinity precisely as the mystery of our salvation. In other words, the mystery of the Trinity is the mystery of God’s gracious self-communication to the world, a process that takes place precisely in and through the human (self)-communication that it enables, transforms and brings to fulfillment.

Further, the first text highlights a point critical for these reflections: the ultimate purpose of human communication is the unity in love of all men and women as brothers and sisters. In other words, communication is directed toward communion. One of the key questions we have to face today is how to use the new communications technologies to enable, support and nourish such communication. This is far from obvious.

Finally, a confession. From my initial remarks, it may already be clear that I consider the Trinity to be the mystery of God’s real self-communication to the world, not, or at least not chiefly the “mystery of the eternal communion between the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, who live a single divine life” (CP, 8). Like many official church documents and most traditional trinitarian theologies, this text seems to refer to the so-called immanent Trinity, that is, a doctrine of the divine persons considered “in themselves” apart from their to us or the world. In my
opinion, a doctrine of the eternal relations of (immanent) trinitarian persons has nothing to offer a theology of communications.

Most traditional trinitarian theologies do make statements about God’s inner life, about the nature of inner-trinitarian personhood, about their mutual relationships and so on. Although not a part of Jesus teaching, and absent from the New Testament, a doctrine about the “immanent” Trinity as God’s inner being had already developed in concept if not by that name within the first few centuries of Christian thought: theologia was distinguished from oikonomia. It became the subject of ever more sophisticated refinement and explanation, leading to the early classical formulations of the Cappadocians, Augustine, and Aquinas and providing theology with a host of normative concepts to express the doctrine of the personal triunity of God’s own being (the divine persons or hypostases, the processions, the relations, the eternal perichoresis, and so on). At the same time, it is clear that its connection with the concrete biblical witness was obscured and for most Christians, it became totally irrelevant. This fact has been much bemoaned in recent theology and there have been several attempts to make the doctrine intelligible. It seems to me that theological speculation on the inner being of God is precisely that, speculation. Piet Schoonenberg, who accepts Rahner’s famous thesis on the identity of the economic and immanent Trinity, nonetheless insists that “[t]he question of whether God is trinitarian apart from his self-communication in salvation history could be answered if the relationship between God’s immutability and his free self-determination were accessible to us. Because this is not the case, the question remains unanswered and unanswerable. It is thereby eliminated from theology as a meaningless question.”

Perhaps the notion of the “immanent” Trinity can be defended as a conceptual formulation of a presupposition we can (and, perhaps,

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1 This essay is a slightly revised form of a paper that I was asked to deliver by the Communication Theology group at the 1995 Convention of the Catholic Theological Society of America. My interest in the connection between theology and communications developed as a result of giving a paper at the Sixth International Cavalletti Seminar in 1991. Sponsored by the Interdisciplinary Center for Social Communications at the Gregorian University, the conference discussed the foundations for a theology of communication.

must) make concerning God’s inherent communicability, inferred from the reality of God’s self-communication as experienced in Jesus and the Spirit. It seems to me that Catherine LaCugna’s splendid book, *God For Us,* argues in this direction in describing what she calls the emergence and defeat of the doctrine of the Trinity. But far from being the substance or center of the doctrine, it seems to me that the notion of an immanent Trinity of divine persons is at best a kind of remainder concept in the way that Rahner has suggested concerning the place and function of the concept of “pure nature” in the doctrine of grace. Rahner argued for the theological usefulness of the concept of pure nature precisely in order to (1) refer to the real recipient of God’s grace and (2) to emphasize the gratuity of divine grace — even while he insisted that pure nature as such has never existed. This is because, for Rahner, as for Scotus, creation has always been for the sake of sanctification. As Rahner said so simply and powerfully: “Nature is, because grace has to be.” Similarly, it seems to me, the concept of the immanent Trinity functions rhetorically in theology in order to assert the faith claim that the Christian experience of the Spirit in Jesus and the community of faith is truly an experience of God. In other words, these modes of God’s presence (the *tropoi tes hyparcheos* of the Cappadocians) are and truly reveal God. The merciful justice and saving life they reveal are not God’s attitudes of the moment. This Spirit truly is and truly reveals who God is and remains. The concept of the immanent Trinity should not be taken to assert or imply that there is in fact a God who is (or ever was) alone and unrelated to the world. Or, to put it in other words, language about God in Godself should not be taken to refer to God by Godself. Our way of talking about God’s self-possession should not be taken to imply that God is (or ever was alone). As a remainder concept a kind of conceptual presupposition, it is unsuitable as a starting point from which to draw conclusions.


I would insist with Piet Schoonenberg that "all our thinking moves from the world to God, and can never move in the opposite direction." Theologians who appeal to the inner Trinity to justify certain views of society, community or communication violate this logic. In speculating about the inner trinitarian reality of God, theologians make use of concepts and images drawn from human experience and then applied analogously to God. They then try to make the doctrine relevant by showing how it sheds new light on human life. But how can one apply human concepts to God, emphasize their analogous nature (that is, the "greater dissimilarity" between the creator and creatures in the similarity which prompts the comparison), and then turn around and apply these very terms again to the human situation from which they are taken and expect them to have a new "surplus of meaning"?

To take an early example, and perhaps a crude one: Tertullian used the image of the sun, the beam, and the ray as a model for conceptualizing triunity. The relationship between Father, Son and Spirit, however, does not help us to understand light any better. Augustine looked to the experience of the human person as imago dei for the traces of God in order to elaborate his so-called "psychological" doctrine of the Trinity. But his trinitarian doctrine does not help us to understand human consciousness better. In order to suggest why God as perfect love is somehow three and not simply two, Richard of St. Victor turned to Cicero's example of how noble friends share a common cause or delight in a common friend. But the Trinity so conceived cannot then yield deeper insights regarding the nature of the human love from which the analogy was drawn to begin with.

There is another reason why we should resist the temptation to base our reflections on a doctrine of the "immanent" Trinity. Most attempts to correlate a doctrine of inner trinitarian persons to issues of human society (or, in our case, human communication) inevitably exhibit tritheism. Leonardo Boff's, Trinity and Society, is a good example. As laudable as his goals are both the central task of liberation theology, and the vision of a society characterized by loving equality and mutuality his trinitarian theology is hopelessly tritheistic. As Piet Schoonenberg

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6 "Trinity—The Consummated Covenant," 111.
7 Leonardo Boff, Trinity and Society (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1988).
has observed, “[i]mpulses toward collegiality, even if they be toward democracy and respect of the freedom of the other are as such not to be derived from the inner trinitarian relationships. The behavior of Jesus on earth, the washing of feet, for example, would be a better model.”

The fundamental problem here is the concept of person. Virtually every catholic theologian today would admit that neither the classical patristic concept of “hypostasis” nor the scholastic counterpart “subsistent relation” means person in the ordinary (psychological) sense in which the word is understood today. To that extent, the short-hand formula “three persons in one God” inevitably tends to convey a tritheistic conception of God, suggesting, as it does, three distinct consciousnesses. Boff speaks of “distinct, inter-related Subjects.” Even Walter Kasper argues that the three in God are persons in the sense of “subjects who are reciprocally conscious of each other by reason of one and the same consciousness which the three subjects ‘possess’, each in his own proper way.” Such a formulation, though carefully nuanced is still quite problematic. It is hard to see how such speculations do not compromise the basic principle of monotheism.

Here it is worth remembering that according to classical, orthodox theology “person” is not a univocal concept but an analogical one. It refers precisely to the unique reality of each of the three which is not shared by the other two. “Personhood” is not what makes the divine “three” similar to each other, so to speak, but dissimilar. The sense in

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9 “Trinity and Society,” 137. Boff is quite aware of the risk of tritheism in his approach (235), but is willing to run it because he believes “strict monotheism can justify totalitarianism” (20), and is convinced that the notion of the divine *perichoresis* “allows a better understanding of the universe and human society as a process of communication, communion, and union” (235).


11 Here mention may be made of the perplexing use of numbers in trinitarian theology. While there can be no doubt that speaking of three refers to difference and taxis in the Trinity, it should be emphasized, as many classical authors from Basil to Thomas have done, that the numbers are not arithmetic in meaning. Maximus Confessor cautioned that the Godhead is neither one nor three in the way we are used to counting. The divine persons are not a countable three. Thomas spoke of these numbers as transcendental. See Hans Urs von Balthasar, *Theologik III: Geist der Wahrheit* (Einsiedeln: BUDHI 2 — 1997
which each of the three is a "person" at all is radically different from the way in which the other two are "persons". Even as traditional a trinitarian theologian as Rahner, who speaks of each person as "somebody else," but not "something else" insists that "there is no reciprocal "Thou"." One cannot conclude that they each have a distinct consciousness with a proper mind and will simply because they are called "persons" and persons have a mind and will. This, of course, is exactly the case with human persons and frequently a reason for confusion. This is obviously important for our considerations since it is the very use of such terminology that seems to suggest an easy and natural symbiosis between trinitarian doctrine and communications theory in general.

Christian faith and hope in ultimately meaningful communication and in a universal communion of love has its direct foundation in the concrete historical action of Jesus and in the experience of the saving presence of God in the Spirit. In this sense the doctrine of the economic Trinity certainly has something to offer a theology of communications.

The New Context

In our world, the possibility and reality of communication are incredible. Traditional mass media such as radio and network television seem almost eclipsed by developments in cable television, personal computers, the internet, e-mail and other interactive technologies. But a theology of communications, if it is to be at all realistic, must take seriously the reality of the silencing, the marginalization, the manipulation

Johannes Verlag, 1987) 110-116. In view of the basic, non-negotiable monotheism assumed and affirmed by all great theologians of the tradition from the earliest patristic controversies to the present, it seems to me that this is an important issue, and one we have not really yet comprehended. Here, I would agree with Roger Haight, who insists that differentiation does not mean multiplicity because the persons cannot be counted in any finite or univocal way, and because there is always a unity of operation. His conclusion is a sober warning: Theologies that seek to describe or explain the differentiation within God in terms of threeness are purely speculative; they are suspect insofar as they promote a language that undermines the unicity and unity of God which he calls the "single, solid, and guaranteed datum in trinitarian theology." (Roger Haight, "The Point of Trinitarian Theology, Toronto Journal of Theology 4/2 (1988) 191-204 at 196).

13 Ibid, 76.
and the oppression which seem to make real (self)-communication impossible and the hope for a universal community of love illusory. It attempts to answer the question how, in our age of mass communications such self-communication and communion is possible. Is there a reason to hope for it?

A Christian theology of communications looks to the person and mission of Jesus for an "answer". The message of the coming of God's Kingdom, proclaimed by Jesus in words and deeds, revealed for Christian faith especially in his death and resurrection, speaks directly to the question. The Kingdom is a symbol of the universal, loving communion of humankind which is to be brought about by God's saving, reconciling Spirit. That is the single divine desire basic to God's presence and action in the world. In God, and in God alone, the world can and will find such communion. In the experience of Jesus and of the Spirit, Christians claim to experience God's saving presence and action. More precisely, in the experience of the community of faith they find a "reason to hope" that the universal communion of love desired by God will, in the power of the Spirit, finally become a reality. But the church can only be a place of such hope and prophetic promise for the world to the extent that it becomes itself a place where genuinely human, free and "undistorted" communication is possible. Only then (paraphrasing Lumen Gentium 1) can it be an effective sacrament of communication for all human beings.

The two-fold conviction which guides these reflections is quite simple. First, real self-communication in love and the universal communion for which it strives are possible because the Spirit which was present and active in Jesus is God's Spirit and it is given to us, where from within, it opens us up, draws us out and directs us to others.14 Second, true communication as self-giving is necessary for life and salvation because that is precisely what God intends in the saving work of the Kingdom. Opening up ourselves to one another in love is the only way we can live God's life.

Thus, the Christian experience of God in Jesus and in the Spirit allows us to interpret genuine human self-communication as the event

of God's own gracious, saving self-communication to all men and women. From this perspective, it can be seen that communications is an absolutely crucial subject for theological reflection precisely because genuine human (self)communication is the key place where God and God's salvation is realized and experienced (or not)! What kind of "communication" is happening, could happen, should happen in modern "communications"?

*Trinitarian Theology as Christology and Spirituality*

Grounded in the Covenant and central to Israel's faith and hope is the expectation that God has promised salvation to God's people. Although the exact nature of this salvation was unclear, the conviction that God would come to save was at the heart of the messianic hope. The presence of God would mean judgment and destruction of God's enemies, vindication and salvation for God's people. In the prophets, the Kingdom or Reign of God became a central symbol of God's saving presence and action. It came to be understood as the eschatological action of God which would establish universal justice and peace: salvation not only for Israel, but for all the nations.

The announcement of the Kingdom formed the heart of Jesus' ministry, both his words and his actions. Most probably, Jesus himself was conscious of a unique, intimate relationship to the God he called Abba and of the eschatological significance of his own person and mission in service of the Kingdom. It was expressed concretely in the way he spoke of God's love for the poor and sinners, in the way he forgave and healed them and in the way he utterly identified himself with them, even in face of ever-growing opposition and, finally, certain death.

His condemnation and crucifixion, however, threw all of this radically into question, both in his own mind and in the minds of his followers. It was not until he showed himself as alive, raised by God, and until the community experienced the saving power of his Spirit within it, that he and his mission could really become an object of faith.

These two realities must not be separated. The saving experience of the Spirit is what enabled the first witnesses to recognize the presence of the Lord who showed himself alive to them; the appearance of the risen Lord is what filled the disciples with the Spirit. In other words, the recognition of the divinity of Jesus takes place precisely as an expe-
rience of salvation in the Spirit.\textsuperscript{15}

This is precisely where the foundational "trinitarian shift" occurs. Jesus, the preacher of God's saving love, the proclaimer of God's Kingdom, is himself proclaimed by believers to be Lord, the very one in whom God has come to save, the one in whose Spirit the community is, even now, experiencing salvation. This experience is the foundation and the point of any subsequent trinitarian doctrine.\textsuperscript{16} The confession of the divinity of Jesus is founded in an experience of salvation in the Spirit and that salvation is acknowledged to be the gift of God's own divine life.

In other words, what we experience in Jesus and in the Spirit really is God's salvation. From the letters of Paul we learn that the Spirit's saving presence and action was experienced and recognized as a power within the community which freed men and women from sin and selfishness and fear, opened them up, filled them with a sense of freedom and courage, and empowered them for loving, self-sacrificing service in the pattern of Jesus. When the community reflected on its experience of coming together, being formed as a community, of sharing, forgiveness, healing and new found freedom, they came to the conclusion that this was all due to the action of the Spirit of Jesus because, looking back at the life of Jesus, they recognized the same divine power

\textsuperscript{15}I would locate the crucial experience of the divinity of Christ in the outpouring of the Spirit upon the disciples that first constituted them a true community. This is perhaps the underlying insight in the Johannine tradition which connects the appearance of the Lord on the evening of the resurrection with the breathing out of the Spirit. But it is of minor importance whether or not this event is seen to be chronologically simultaneous with the resurrection and appearances, or, as in Luke, it is narrated as an event separated from Easter by fifty days. The point is that the real experience of the divinity of Jesus, i.e., the personal, saving presence of God in Jesus, takes place precisely as an experience of liberation and salvation in his Spirit.

\textsuperscript{16}According to Haight, the point of the doctrine is that "God is absolutely and uniquely one, that God's saving action in Jesus and the Spirit are real, and that therefore God as such is a saving God," quite apart from further speculation about really distinct differentiations within God that can be named or defined ("The Point of Trinitarian Theology," 202). Kasper notes: "The entire Christian economy of salvation is thus a single mystery that can be summed up in one sentence: through Jesus Christ and in the Holy Spirit God is the salvation of humanity" ("The God of Jesus Christ," 270).
in him, accomplishing the very same things.\textsuperscript{17}

Thus, briefly, we can say that the doctrine of the Trinity of salvation history expresses the basic Christian conviction that the work of reconciliation, of liberation, of the establishment of a universal communion of love among men and women is \textit{precisely God's saving work}.\textsuperscript{18} This, surely, is the concrete trinitarian foundation for a theology of communication. The saving work of God is accomplished as the Spirit within empowers and leads men and women to encounter each other in true love.\textsuperscript{19} According to the example of Jesus, such encounter or “communication” takes the form of real self-bestowal, the sharing of oneself. It is not merely a polite exchange of words or transmission of information but, finally, self-sacrificing love. Through such human self-communication, the Spirit intends to form the entire human race into one communion of love, bringing about the salvation of the world and manifesting the divine glory in its fullness. In this sense, I would agree fully with \textit{Communio et Progressio}, which states that since God’s self-communication to humanity in Christ, human communication finds its “highest ideal and supreme example in God who has become man and brother” (CP 10). And with reference to CP 8, I would say that God’s

\textsuperscript{17} Christian experience of and faith in the triune God arises from a kind of correlation between a personal experience of “death and resurrection” or “liberation” and the life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This is the heart of Paul’s language about being baptized into Christ (Romans 6) and sharing Christ’s Spirit (Romans 8). The Spirit at work in believers is seen to be the same Spirit at work in the person and ministry of Jesus. The divine, saving “truth” manifested in the later must be verified, as it were, in the former. The loving union of believers is the “proof” that Jesus and the Spirit are of God (compare John 17:23). Otherwise faith is reduced to a mere assent to “supernatural” truths or to a merely otherworldly salvation beyond our experience.

\textsuperscript{18} Robert Sears, “Trinitarian Love as Ground of the Church” in Theological Studies 652-82 writes: “If we view the cross/resurrection event as revealing God’s Trinitarian love, four qualities of that love appear: His sovereign freedom, His fidelity to His promises and the continuity of His call, the universality of His love, and its community forming power” (660).

\textsuperscript{19} In an excellent treatment of revelation as self-communication, Frans Jozef van Beeck SJ speaks of the transcendent, gracious self communicative Presence that inspires and guarantees the freedom with which the best among us communicate themselves to other persons. Only an unconditional, all-enabling Presence is transcendent enough to move our innermost immanence to open itself to others without anxiety about ourselves.” See “Divine Revelation: Intervention or Self-Communication?,” \textit{Theological Studies}, (1991) 199-226 at 222.
self-communication to *humanity* (not "the central mystery of the eterna]nal communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit) is the "source and model" for the unity of the human family.

Here, the concrete life of Jesus is a norm and a model for behavior, not to be slavishly copied, but to inspire our imaginations in the possibilities and demands of real self-communication. What does it mean concretely for God to give Godself to us? What does it mean to communicate oneself, to give oneself to another in a way that is ultimately saving?

It is not sufficient to leave self-communication, either God's or ours, on the rather general level of a "sharing in the Spirit". That is surely true, but the Spirit of God is active and known by certain effects or "fruits" of that action. As Paul reminds us, we shall know that we are sharing in God's Spirit if our lives become conformed to Christ's. Jesus not only spoke about God's reign and about the graciousness and universality of God's love. He enacted it. While he associated himself with all kinds of people, he identified himself in a special way with sinners, with the poor, prostitutes, lepers, tax collectors, women, children, with the "least of the brothers and sisters". Today we would call them the marginalized. What does this tell us about the nature and scope of self-communication: God's and ours?

God's self-communication is not merely a divine address containing truths. It is personal presence which responds directly to the oppression and injustice wrought by sin. Understanding God's self-communication in the light of Jesus' identification with the oppressed reveals the fact that God's "cause" is precisely the cause and the plight of those who suffer. But beyond taking up the cause of those who suffer, beyond "standing for" sinners, Jesus "stands with" sinners and, therefore, with all men and women without exception. In this he is the revelation of God whose personal presence offers hope to both the oppressed and their oppressors that God's Spirit can reconcile them and restore communication and loving community both with God and with all men and women.

In the same way, a Christian will understand that communication at its deepest level is "the giving of self in love" (CP 11) and that the "unity and brotherhood of man are the chief aims of all communication" (CP 8) *precisely since they are God's chief aims in the economy of salvation*. This is supported by Paul's reflections on the Spirit in Chris-
tian life. The primary categories he uses to speak of God’s self-com-
munication in the Spirit are freedom, reconciliation, communion and
service (Galatians 5; 2 Corinthians 5). But God’s self-communication
is quite literally a sharing in God’s “gifts” (com-munus), that is to say,
God’s own divine life. The gifts of the Spirit (which is just another way
of naming or describing the Spirit’s action as mediated in the action of
believers) are all given for the building up of the community (1
Corinthians 12). To the extent that we allow ourselves to be opened up
and freed for love by the Spirit and give ourselves in love to our fellow
men and women, we allow the appearance of God’s final reign of jus-
tice and peace, a communion of love embracing all and women.

Paul reminds us that the saving work of the Spirit finds normative
expression in the words and deeds of Jesus. The kind of freedom, for-
giveness and love which are the work of God’s Spirit are visible in him.
His action is the model and criterion to which believers refer in order
to discern the presence of God’s saving Spirit and the specific demands
and dimensions of salvation in particular, concrete situations. That is
why Paul insists that participation in the Spirit entails being a commu-
nity of one mind and one love and urges believers to be of the same
mind as Christ, following his example of self-emptying love (Philippians
2).

Concluding Remarks

On the basis of these reflections, it can be stated that God’s saving self-
communication in Jesus and the Spirit intends, constitutes and is actu-
alyzed in human communion. To the extent that communication has
real self-communication and personal communion as its goal, to the
extent that real community is founded upon and mediated by such com-
unication, we can say that human communication is the real symbol
of God’s saving self-communication. 20 Thus it is clear why and in what

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20 The Christian experience of God in Jesus and in the Spirit allows us to interpret any
and all genuine human self-communication as the event of God’s own gracious, sav-
ing self-communication. To formulate it more briefly: the Christian experience of God
and of God’s salvation takes place in and through genuine human communication.
Again, I would like to emphasize that while this certainly includes sacramental action,
preaching, praying and faith-sharing, it is not by any means limited to these.
sense a theology of the Trinity in the economy of salvation is an appropriate theological centering point for a theology of communication.

Turning directly to the issue of the church’s mission regarding communications, I would like to make the following observations.

(1) The doctrine of the Trinity, referring as it does to God’s self-communication, should remind us that the proper goal of human communication in all its forms is self-communication. Divine revelation is not the transmission of supernatural information about God; it is the sharing of divine life. The church’s interest and responsibility in communications should be something far deeper than propaganda. The tasks of evangelization and moral leadership are not accomplished simply by broadcasting the “facts”, be they the gospel texts, church doctrines or the “official Catholic position” on this or that issue. It goes without saying that church leaders at every level have to become more familiar and comfortable – even sophisticated with the mass media. But looking at the communications media and trying to decide where to invest our time and energy, we have to ask ourselves what exactly it is that we wish to communicate. We should be finding ways to share the experience of the Good News rather than informing people about it.

Of course, in order to do this, the church must study how the new communications media influence and form people of today. To borrow Rahner’s phrase: “what does it mean to be a hearer of the “word” today? Which communications media are most significant today? Which are able to mediate real human self-communication? Which tend to isolate, anesthetize, or manipulate?

Any form of human communication, no matter how apparently mundane, inasmuch as and to the extent that it is really self-communication is precisely divine, saving self-communication. See Karl Rahner, “On the Theology of Worship” in Theological Investigations 19 (New York: Crossroad, 1983) 141-49, who argues that explicit religious symbolic communication is not the only presence of saving grace in an otherwise graceless world. On the contrary it brings to expression in a deeper way the saving sacramentality of everyday life.

In the Catholic church, it seems to me that there has been more success in the print and cassette (both audio and video) media than in television. No one can deny that in the past there have been striking and compelling Catholic personalities (both good and bad) in American the radio and television. But today, it is a different story. I suspect most Catholics would be hard pressed to name someone else on TV in addition to Mother Angelica, whom we love to hate. Print and cassette materials, especially those relating to spirituality and scripture study and helpful for small, parish based groups, seem more able to facilitate real "connection" and personal contact. In this respect, I find the whole phenomenon of tele evangelism fascinating and worthy of study. What can we do with television? What could we hope to accomplish; what would we want to avoid? These are questions for the Catholic imagination. Is our reticence and suspicion about such use of the media solely a question of backwardness or recent scandals? I suspect it has something to do with the sacramental, incarnational heart of Catholic Christianity.

Further, since divine self-communication happens precisely in authentic human communication, the church has a critical responsibility to be a moral voice and an agent for the promotion and humanization of communications. This leads to my second point.

(2) Beyond the need to keep asking whether and how genuine self-communication, personal encounter and community are happening and could happen better through different use of communications media, the concrete figure of Jesus is a challenge for those working in communications.

In the context of these reflections, let us say that Jesus not only announced the Kingdom; he communicated it. Central to his "communicative praxis" was his presence for and with the marginalized of his world. In other words, Jesus communicated the message and the reality of the Kingdom in a rather specific way: solidarity with those who were without voice. The particular significance of his table fellowship with sinners and tax collectors, his healing ministry among the disabled and the unclean and his friendship with women and foreigners has rightfully been highlighted and explored in much recent christology.
Let us, for a moment, imagine this as a ministry of communication. Jesus can be seen as one who not only brings a message (and a personal presence!) of God but who also enables the outcast, the stranger, the sick and the marginalized to find their voices. In fact, the two are inseparable, least from one perspective, the experience of being returned to the community, of gaining a voice, of being able to communicate — not only to talk but to share one's own gifts and to share in the gifts of the others — is this not precisely the sign of God's presence and action in the Spirit?

Thus, the task of the church as it embraces the communications media should be to establish and nourish the community by ensuring that the voices of all are heard, especially the voices of those who are regularly silenced or forgotten. This is a formidable challenge for a church that so often has squelched debate and silenced those who disagree dissenters. While we might bewail the problems of secular programming and "Catholic bashing", we have to face the problem of censorship within the church. The church is well aware of the power of the media. This is precisely the reason that recourse to the public forum is not tolerated as a form of controversial discussion or dissent.

In this regard, the internet may prove an unexpected blessing. With the advent of e-mail and countless interest groups on the "net", a kind of connection, of sharing of concerns, insights and work are possible — and actual — in ways heretofore unparalleled. Despite the perennial "bad rap" that the electronic media get as impersonal and impersonalizing, the phenomenon of e-mail and internet interest groups show that computers can actually make personal encounters possible in a new way. I find, for example, that people who were bad correspondents (either through letters or over the telephone) are often extremely regular communicators over the net. A number of factors are no doubt responsible, among them: low cost, immediate interaction and a certain distance that paradoxically enables intimacy. (Anyone who has written love letters knows this.) This is not to deny the problems which have arisen. The

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anonymity of the net “persona” has given rise to legitimate concerns about the sexual safety of minors, the accessibility of pornography and so on. In addition, the faceless voice of internet communication has also led to the phenomenon of “flaming”. It is easy to tear someone or someone’s work apart from the hidden privacy of one’s own PC.

Nonetheless, I can envision the internet as a place where dialogue, free exchange of information and ideas, critical research, advocacy and organizing could happen in a relatively “grass roots” way, unimpeded by ecclesiastical censorship. It could be a way in which local church groups and intentional communities of various sorts could stay connected for mutual support and growth. It may be hard to imagine such efforts being funded by typical diocesan structures; is it possible that religious orders traditionally concerned with preaching, communication and education might begin to put some of their resources to work here? This leads me to my third and final point.

(3) It seems to me that one important entry point for the church into the new world of communications can come through its educational institutions. In a recent special issue of the Journal of the American Academy of Religion Mark Taylor of Williams College speaks of a transition to the postmodern “cyberversity”, which entails the shift of paradigm of the factory to that of the network.24 He describes a teleseminar that he developed in conjunction with colleagues and students in Helsinki. It was both audio and visual and completely interactive. He reports how he has incorporated electronic discussion of texts in his ordinary courses, at times inviting the participation of former students and other faculty who are working in similar areas. He suggests how a small group of colleges and universities could initiate joint programs without significantly increasing the size of their faculties through the creative use of computers and telecommunications.

Apart from the obvious imaginative question, “Should we being doing that at our schools?” I think Taylor’s experiments are suggestive for those who may be looking for new ways to connect congregations, small interest, advocacy or study groups to professional resources which are not always close at hand. And the implications for a sharing of re-

sources on an international level are quite astounding. Beyond the question of access, I think the opportunities of new technologies as interactive are particularly significant, because they do have the capability to allow persons to connect in ways previously impossible. Because of this, there is a chance, at least, that such forms of communication go beyond the mere exchange of information and facilitate a new form of personal presence and sharing.

To summarize: the mystery of God’s trinitarian love is the mystery of God’s loving communion with the world, a divine love that makes possible and is communicated in and through authentic human communication. God’s “self” communication brings about at the same time a finding and sharing of self that establishes true community among men and women. The church’s task for the present and future is to imagine how the new communications media can and the discovery of one’s own truest self.