

Freedom of Information 'Essential' - - Vatican Document

Washington, D.C. — (RNS)— The newly-published 23,000-word Vatican pastoral instruction on the mass media, which calls for freedom of expression and information as an absolute "essential" in the Church, marks a "coming of age" in Catholicism, according to the U.S. Bishops Communication Committee here.

A commentary by the U.S. Catholic Conference agency on the Vatican instruction said "the theory and practice of American communications media — concepts such as the importance of public opinion, the right of the public to be informed, the constructive and indeed essential role of the media in the life of modern society — have clearly had an impact on the formulation of this document."

The pastoral instruction, entitled *Communio et Progressio* (Unity Advancement) in its first words, was endorsed by Pope Paul and is aimed at the implementation of the Vatican II Decree on Communications. It has been in preparation for six

years by the Pontifical Commission on Social Communications.

Initially stating that "the unity and advancement of men living in society . . . are the chief aims of social communication and of all the means it uses," it promises the use of these media as "gifts of God" which "unite men in brotherhood and so help them to cooperate with his plan for their salvation."

In the foreword, the instruction calls on the bishops and their conferences, and also synods of the Eastern Churches, "to implement the instruction efficiently" and to seek the best way of adapting it to the needs of the people of God.

Dealing with the contributions of communication to human progress the document declares that "public opinion is an essential expression of human nature organized in a society," and that "freedom of speech is a normal factor in the growth of public opinion which expresses the ideas and reactions of the more influential circles in a society..."

"If public opinion is to emerge in the proper fashion," the document continues, "it is absolutely essential that there be freedom to express ideas and attitudes."

"In order that men may usefully cooperate and further improve the life of the community, there must be freedom to assess and compare differing views which seem to have weight and validity," it declares.

The Vatican instruction also observes that if public opinion is to be formed properly, "it is necessary that . . . the public be given free access to both the sources and the channels of information and be allowed freely to express its own views."

However, the document points out that the right to information is not limitless and must be reconciled with existing rights — the rights that guard a man's good name, the right of privacy and the right of secrecy, where the common good requires it.

Speaking of those in communications industries, the instruction cites the need for competence in their duties. It also states that the media is obliged to "adopt a neutral stance" to avoid offending any section of the audience.

The pastoral document goes on to discuss the role of various forms of media in expressing the Catholic point of view. It cites the printed word — especially the Catholic press and urges its strong promotion — the motion picture, radio and television and the theater. In

its conclusion, the document notes that the Church may be on the threshold of a "new era" in communication, offering the possibility of widespread education and dialogue among peoples.

Several Americans were involved in the work of the pontifical commission that prepared the instruction. Archbishop Martin J. O'Connor is president

of the commission, and Archbishop Philip M. Hannan of New Orleans is a member. Consultants include Father Patrick Sullivan, S.J., director of the National Catholic Office for Motion Pictures; Charles E. Reilly Jr., director of the National Catholic Office for Radio and Television; and Msgr. Timothy Flynn, former director of the New York archdiocese's communications office.

Niebuhr: Major Voice In Ecumenical Affairs

New York — (RNS) — The Protestant theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, who died June 1 in Stockbridge, Mass., played a major role in bringing about friendlier, interreligious relations.

In his voluminous writings, Niebuhr pays frequent tribute to Catholic thought for its creativity in the area of social ethics, which was his own field of special interest. In his last book, *Man's Nature and His Communities* (1965), he wrote:

"I was never a polemical Protestant Christian, trying to score off the Jewish and Catholic faiths. But I was increasingly impressed by the fact that both the Jewish and the Catholic faith revealed an awareness of the social substance of man's existence and supplied in different ways, the norms of jus-

tice, which are increasingly required in a collectivist age and which some forms of extravagant Protestantism lack."

Continuously involved in political affairs, Niebuhr also found himself frequently allied with Catholic politicians against many of his fellow Protestants.

While many Protestants were expressing misgivings about a Catholic president, Niebuhr supported both Al Smith in 1928 and John F. Kennedy in 1960.

Niebuhr was not uncritical of Catholics, rejecting, for example, their natural law theories that led to the Catholic prohibition of birth control. And in his magnum opus, *The Nature and Destiny of Man*, based on his Gifford Lectures of 1939-40, he strongly criticized the papacy for its claims.

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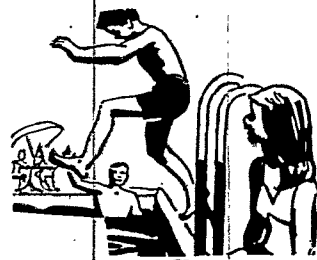
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