



POPE BENEDICT XVI

WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY 2012

Silence and Word: Path of Evangelization

FEAST OF ST FRANCIS DE SALES, 24 JANUARY 2012

Dear Brothers and Sisters,

As we draw near to World Communications Day 2012, I would like to share with you some reflections concerning an aspect of the human process of communication which, despite its importance, is often overlooked and which, at the present time, it would seem especially necessary to recall. It concerns the relationship between silence and word: two aspects of communication which need to be kept in balance, to alternate and to be integrated with one another if authentic dialogue and deep closeness between people are to be achieved. When word and silence become mutually exclusive, communication breaks down, either because it gives rise to confusion or because, on the contrary, it creates an atmosphere of coldness; when they complement one another, however, communication acquires value and meaning.

Silence is an integral element of communication; in its absence, words rich in content cannot exist. In silence, we are better able to listen to and understand ourselves; ideas come to birth and acquire depth; we understand with greater clarity what it is we want to say and what we expect from others; and we choose how to express ourselves. By remaining silent we allow the other person to speak, to express him or herself; and we avoid being tied simply to our own words and ideas without them being adequately tested. In this way, space is created for mutual listening, and deeper human relationships become possible. It is often in silence, for example, that we observe the most authentic communication taking place between people who are in love: gestures, facial expressions and body language are signs by which they reveal themselves to each other. Joy, anxiety, and suffering can all be communicated in silence – indeed it provides them with a particularly powerful mode of expression. Silence, then, gives rise to even more active communication, requiring sensitivity and a capacity to listen that often makes manifest the true measure and nature of the relationships involved. When messages and information are plentiful, silence becomes essential if we are to distinguish what is important from what is insignificant or secondary. Deeper reflection helps us to discover the links between events that at first sight seem unconnected, to make evaluations, to analyze messages; this makes it possible to share thoughtful and relevant opinions, giving rise to an authentic body of shared knowledge. For this to happen, it is necessary to develop an appropriate environment, a kind of ‘eco-system’ that maintains a just equilibrium between silence, words, images and sounds.

The process of communication nowadays is largely fuelled by questions in search of answers. Search engines and social networks have become the starting point of communication for many people who are seeking advice, ideas, information and answers. In our time, the internet is becoming ever more a forum for questions and answers – indeed, people today are frequently bombarded with answers to questions they have never asked and to needs of which they were unaware. If we are to recognize and focus upon the truly important questions, then silence is a precious commodity that enables us to exercise proper discernment in the face of the surcharge of stimuli and data that we receive. Amid the complexity and diversity of the world of communications, however, many people find themselves confronted with the ultimate questions of human existence: Who am I? What can I know? What ought I to do? What may I hope? It is important to affirm those who ask these questions, and to open up the possibility of a profound dialogue, by means of words and interchange, but also through the call to silent reflection, something that is often more eloquent than a hasty answer and permits seekers to reach into the depths of their being and open themselves to the path towards knowledge that God has inscribed in human hearts.

Ultimately, this constant flow of questions demonstrates the restlessness of human beings, ceaselessly searching for truths, of greater or lesser import, that can offer meaning and hope to their lives. Men and women cannot rest content with a superficial and unquestioning exchange of skeptical opinions and experiences of life – all of us are in search of truth and we share this profound yearning today more than ever: “When people exchange information, they are already sharing themselves, their view of the world, their hopes, their ideals” (Message for the 2011 World Day of Communications).

Attention should be paid to the various types of websites, applications and social networks which can help people today to find time for reflection and authentic questioning, as well as making space for silence and occasions for prayer, meditation or sharing of the word of God. In concise phrases, often no longer than a verse from the Bible, profound thoughts can be communicated, as long as those taking part in the conversation do not neglect to cultivate their own inner lives. It is hardly surprising that different religious traditions consider solitude and silence as privileged states which help people to rediscover themselves and that Truth which gives meaning to all things. The God of biblical revelation speaks also without words: “As the Cross of Christ demonstrates, God also speaks by his silence. The silence of God, the experience of the distance of the almighty Father, is a decisive stage in the earthly journey of the Son of God, the incarnate Word God’s silence prolongs his earlier words. In these moments of darkness, he speaks through the mystery of his silence” (Verbum Domini, 21). The eloquence of God’s love, lived to the point of the supreme gift, speaks in the silence of the Cross. After Christ’s death there is a great silence over the earth, and on Holy Saturday, when “the King sleeps and God slept in the flesh and raised up those who were sleeping from the ages” (cf. Office of Readings, Holy Saturday), God’s voice resounds, filled with love for humanity.

If God speaks to us even in silence, we in turn discover in silence the possibility of speaking with God and about God. “We need that silence which becomes contemplation, which introduces us into God’s silence and brings us to the point where the Word, the redeeming Word, is born” (Homily, Eucharistic Celebration with Members of the International Theological Commission, 6 October 2006). In speaking of God’s grandeur, our language will always prove inadequate and must make space for silent contemplation. Out of such contemplation springs forth, with all its inner power, the urgent sense of mission, the compelling obligation “to communicate that which we have seen and heard” so that all may be in communion with God (1 Jn 1:3). Silent contemplation immerses us in the source of that Love who directs us towards our neighbours so that we may feel their suffering and offer them the light of Christ, his message of life and his saving gift of the fullness of love.

In silent contemplation, then, the eternal Word, through whom the world was created, becomes ever more powerfully present and we become aware of the plan of salvation that God is accomplishing throughout our history by word and deed. As the Second Vatican Council reminds us, divine revelation is fulfilled by “deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them” (Dei Verbum, 2). This plan of salvation culminates in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the mediator and the fullness of all revelation. He has made known to us the true face of God the Father and by his Cross and Resurrection has brought us from the slavery of sin and death to the freedom of the children of God. The fundamental question of the meaning of human existence finds in the mystery of Christ an answer capable of bringing peace to the restless human heart. The Church’s mission springs from this mystery; and it is this mystery which impels Christians to become heralds of hope and salvation, witnesses of that love which promotes human dignity and builds justice and peace.

Word and silence: learning to communicate is learning to listen and contemplate as well as speak. This is especially important for those engaged in the task of evangelization: both silence and word are essential elements, integral to the Church’s work of communication for the sake of a renewed proclamation of Christ in today’s world. To Mary, whose silence “listens to the Word and causes it to blossom” (Private Prayer at the Holy House, Loreto, 1 September 2007), I entrust all the work of evangelization which the Church undertakes through the means of social communication.

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