



# CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE

## World Communications Day *Homily Notes*

ASCENSION SUNDAY, 12 MAY 2013

### Homily notes

When a new vicar came to the parish he preached a marvellous sermon at his first service, all about loving God and loving our neighbour. Afterwards he was showered with compliments and congratulations on such a wonderful homily. The next week he gave the same homily, and he was still complimented for the quality of his preaching. When he gave the same homily a third and a fourth time, a deputation from the parish came to see him. "Marvellous sermon, Vicar, but why do you always give the same one". He answered quietly that he had spoken on a subject close to Our Lord's heart, and would move on to a different subject as soon as there was some sign that what he had said had made some difference to his congregation.

Today we celebrate Our Lord's Ascension, in some ways the day Jesus "left us to it". His version of "get on with things, chaps" seems an impossible task. The Gospel writers tell it in slightly different ways, and this year Luke depicts Jesus talking to his disciples in Jerusalem and telling them that the Scriptures will be fulfilled if "repentance for the forgiveness of sins" is preached in his name "to all the nations, beginning from Jerusalem". He took them to a place near Bethany where "he withdrew from them and was carried up to heaven".

"All nations": to Jewish ears that means haggoyim, the non-Jews, the rest of the world. Not only do the disciples have to brave the fierce antagonism of the Jerusalemites, in the city where their leader had recently endured a trial and public execution, but they have to pack their bags and head off to speak of Jesus to everyone, everywhere.

We hear this instruction from Jesus every year. Like the vicar's congregation, we can say, "that's nice, but I've heard it before", or we could ask ourselves, "have we done it yet? What is left to be done?"

Every year, the whole Church is asked to pray for renewed energy in communicating with the rest of the world, precisely in order to respond to that daunting command of Jesus to speak of Him to everyone, everywhere. And every year for a long time now the Pope has composed a message to encourage us. This year we have Pope Benedict's last World Communications Day message, in which he asks us to consider how we can make the most of the digital social networks.

Social networks - what did he mean by that? It is one of those phrases that can divide us into various groups. The first division is between people that know what these social networks are and people who don't. The words Twitter and Facebook may help. The second division is between people who have access to the social networks and people who don't. To have access you need a computer, which means electricity, money and being able to read and write, at least in a basic way. The majority of people in the richer countries do have these things, but there are far more people out there who don't. Social networks can actually bridge that gap, when the people with access to them in the poorer parts of the world find ways of using them on behalf of the local community.

Pope Benedict sees the world of social networks as part of the world, “all the nations”, to which we are to preach the name of Jesus. He has a positive approach. Here are some of the points he makes:

- torrents of information can be transformed into communication between people
- links on a computer screen can be transformed into friendships
- connections through social networks can open the door to communion

The Good News may not have reached many of those using the social networks, so Christians need to learn the languages (words, images and sounds) used in the digital social networks - not to be absorbed by their concerns but to speak clearly to the people who use them and to understand them - and learn how to use Christian symbols effectively in that world. Here our rich tradition has a lot to offer.

Christians living in geographically or culturally isolated situations at last have a way of seeing and hearing what other Christians are doing. We are well off in terms of finding support all around us, although some in our own land feel occasionally mocked or ostracised for standing up for their faith in Christ. Pope Benedict suggested making the most of the social networks to offer support to anyone in need of it.

Prayer, meditation and different techniques for sharing God’s Word are already part of the digital world. But what social networks are doing is leading more and more people to face-to-face encounters like pilgrimages and gatherings in shrines or churches. Pope Benedict gave his backing to all these developments, and concluded his message for this year’s World Day of Communications like this: “When we are present to others, in any way at all, we are called to make known the love of God to the furthest ends of the earth”.

One point where Pope Benedict and Pope Francis have given almost identical messages is in dealing with people who do not share our beliefs. Gentle, polite dialogue based on strong convictions is able to speak without the loudness and divisiveness of much of the digital world. All we need is to encourage others to hear God’s “still, small voice” (1 Kings 19, 11-12). Pope Benedict gave a strong reminder that our inventiveness and eloquence are dwarfed by the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the way we communicate. And Pope Francis, when he met the press corps a few days after his election, treated them charmingly, assuring them he respected their consciences, precisely because, for him, each person he engages in conversation is a child of God.

## **Introduction to Mass**

Today we recall an event that really shook the followers of Jesus. He left them. But He left them with a remarkable challenge, to preach his message to all the nations. They would have to work out how to communicate with people in different countries and cultures, and have the courage to leave behind their familiar surroundings and set out on a journey, a mission. Even today, we take this challenge seriously and do our best to communicate with people wherever we meet them about our faith. That is why today is set aside as the day when we pray for the work the Church does in the communications media, World Communications Day