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The Church and the Right to Information

The public image of the church today in relation to human freedom is an ambivalent one, particularly where the values of freedom of thought, opinion and communication are concerned. The church seems often to be facing in opposite directions depending on whether these values are under threat *inside* or *outside* its ranks.

In democracies and dictatorships alike, the church supports the right of peaceful dissent and challenges the established powers to live up to Christian principles. The Polish church protects and defends social protest and free trade unions; U.S. bishops question the morality and legitimacy of nuclear deterrence.

Yet in internal matters the church often appears to be itself an established power fighting to suppress legitimate criticism. The secrecy surrounding the affairs of the Vatican is sometimes perceived by outside opinion as a cloak for, at the least, incompetence and fearfulness, at the worst dishonesty and authoritarianism.

The post-Vatican II church is increasingly aware that internal organizational practice must be consistent with its proclaimed principles. This issue looks at the way the church is coming to terms with the right to information from historical, sociological and theological viewpoints.

The Right to Information: A Challenge to the Church

Giselbert Deussen. 'Communio et Progressio auf dem Hintergrund der päpstlichen Lehrtradition'. (Communio et Progressio in the context of Papal Teaching Tradition). In Eilers, Franz-Josef et al, eds, *Kirche und Publizistik* (Munich: Verlag Ferdinand Schönigh, 1972).

'Information als Verkundigung? Zum Problem des Informationsrechts in der Kirche' (Information as Proclamation? On the Problem of the Right to Information in the Church). *Communicatio Socialis*, Vol. 10 No 3 (July/Sept.) 1977, p.169-178.

The developing self-understanding of the church in relation to communication problems can be traced in its official teachings and pronouncements. (Some of the more important recent statements are set on page 12). Both studies examined here are attempts to set in historical context and to evaluate official teaching on the right to information inside the church. Official church teaching on the place of information and the right to information within its ranks have been shaped and continue to be formed by three underlying premises. First, the media of communication are powerful moulders of opinions and attitudes. Such power is to be distrusted. Secondly, the church has a right and duty to use these powerful media for its own good purposes. However, their power means that the freedom claimed by communicators must be limited by the church in the interests of truth. The church is the guardian of truth. Thirdly, it is not possible to apply notions of freedom of communication, or the right to information appropriate in secular society to the church itself. The church is a unique kind of society and has its own proper rules and understanding of communication.

Fear of the Powerful Press

Papal attitudes to freedom of information and communication have varied under the influence of changing social and political conditions. From the time of the French revolution until the beginning of the twentieth century, the dominant attitude was a mixture of hostility and fear. For Gregory XVI and Pius IX the free liberal press was a fomenter of unwanted social change and a proclaimer of heresies. The church had to close ranks in the face of the modern world and its strident herald.

The 'Good' and the 'Bad' Press

Pope Leo XIII began the process of learning to come to terms with the modern world. He recognized a qualified freedom of opinion and of the press. For him and his successors the key problem was how to harness the power of the press to the purposes of authority. The church saw an opposition between Catholic truth defended and expounded by a God-given authority, and a freedom of the press and opinion which allowed error to flourish.

Leo's solution and the one favoured by his successors up until the present time, was to create a 'good' religious press to counter the 'bad' secular press. In the right hands and subject to proper guidance the press (and later radio and tv) could support and defend the church's interests and doctrines. In this view, liberty of opinion or rights to information within the church were more or less unthinkable. The Catholic press were to transmit the decisions and information provided by authority to the attentive faithful.

Public Opinion in the Church

This one-way, top-down model of communication and information flow has not yet lost its power in the church. It is true that Pius XII (1939-1959) recognized the value and necessity of public opinion in and outside the church, and that John XXIII's encyclical *Pacem in Terris* proclaimed the right to information as a fundamental human right. Furthermore, later documents such as *Inter Mirifica* (1963) and *Communio et Progressio* (1971) have amplified and reiterated this right. Nevertheless, argues Deussen, the old attitudes persist and the right to information is not yet firmly established within the church.

The reason for this unsatisfactory situation is the continuing refusal of the church authorities to apply the same rules to themselves as to people and organizations outside the church. Even *Communio et Progressio,* which is the document that speaks most favourably of the place of public opinion and dialogue within the church, qualifies the exercise of this freedom! It draws a sharp distinction between the freedom of "scientific investigation" given to experts and matters concerning the teaching of the faithful.

According to Deussen *Communio et Progressio* shows how older attitudes of distrust of the media coexist uneasily with newer affirmations of the need for free communication. At the same time freedom of opinion is seen as a potential threat to authority. For the church authorities the nature of the church as a divinely established institution means that "democratic" freedoms are inappropriate. Official teaching should not be questioned, and free public opinion must be severely circumscribed.

Information as Proclamation

The church's way of dealing with information in the church is to incorporate it into the theological notion of proclamation. This has several consequences: 1) the right to information in human society can be maintained as essentially different from a right to information in the church; 2) the use of the media by the Church is governed by the idea that they are instruments of evangelization. Church information, therefore, is also a kind of evangelization; 3) there is no need to reform the organizational and authority structures in the church in response to a new understanding of dialogue within the church.

One consequence of this internal church policy is that the generally negative attitude to public opinion and the press remains entrenched among church officials. This attitude can remain even though in principle the church proclaims the right to information as a positive human value. Perhaps even more seriously, modern theology has not yet managed to create a more adequate understanding of the relationship between information and evangelization. Theological understanding of communication remains largely bound to inherited attitudes. It is time, thinks Deussen, that the more positive insights of the church be taken up and applied to intra-church communication.

The Role of Information Control in the Church

John A Coleman. *The Evolution of Dutch Catholicism, 1958-1974.* (Berkeley, CA: London: University of California Press, 1978).

Arguments about the establishment of a right of information within the church easily become discussions of abstract principle. Such arguments need to be anchored in a more concrete understanding of how intra-church information is actually channeled and controlled on a day-to-day basis. Before reforms in church practice can take place, the present position needs to be better analysed and the key practical problems identified.

The Evolution of Dutch Catholicism, as the title suggests, is a study of how the Dutch church has changed between 1958 and 1974. In that period it moved from being one of the most traditional of national churches to being the symbolic leader of progressive Catholicism. This profound and dramatic change is analysed by Coleman as explicable in terms of the Dutch church's need to respond to changing social conditions and attitudes and to accomodate the reforms initiated by the Vatican Council II. Coleman shows that this process of change was both a consequence and an effect of changes in information flow and control.

Public Opinion in the Church

Vatican Council II was an unparalleled media event in the life of the church. Intense press coverage of its proceedings opened up the internal workings of the church to the view of believer and non-believer alike. In the lure of publicity, the pluriformity of parties and theologies within Catholicism were plain for all to see.

However, Catholic tradition provided neither a theory nor a structure appropriate to this revelation of a free public opinion. Before the Council the ecclesiastical establishment had been able to control information by hiding church decision-making behind bureaucratic secrecy. For example, priests, theologians and laity were often required to take an oath of secrecy promising not to reveal the content of discussion with superiors. In addition, the general Catholic attitude that saw the church as a fortress of truth in a world of error acted to inhibit internal public argument and criticism.

The pluriformity publicized by the Council put these older attitudes in question. Among those who responded favourably to the new situation were the Dutch bishops. Vatican Council II revealed that the Dutch episcopacy had been evolving a new style of leadership and that Dutch Catholicism as a whole had been developing a new model of church. In that new model the role of information was crucial.

A New Style of Leadership

The Dutch bishops in the early 1960s recognized that much in the church's traditional way of doing things needed reforming. In particular they saw that preaching, celebration of the liturgy and catechesis were rather neglected. It seems often as if the older rather authoritarian organizational structures were getting in the way of the building up of a genuine community of faith. The bishops believed that by implementing a new dialogic authority structure — in which bishops and priests listened to each other and to the laity, as well as speaking — they could better respond to the real needs of the whole church.

Freedom of Speech in the Church

This dialogic authority structure not only tolerated free public opinion in the church but actually encouraged its development. In 1964 Cardinal Alfrink asserted that freedom of speech belongs to the very essence of the church. He put forward three rules for the exercise of free speech in the church: 1) freedom of speech should build up the Catholic faith; 2) free speech should respect the faith of others in the church; and 3) free speech does not mean pushing your opinion on those unwilling to listen.

Alfrink also urged journalists to develop a code of ethics that would govern their reporting of church matters. In doing so he was emphasising the personal responsibility of the journalists and appealing not to an external sanction but to an internal guide to ensure that freedom was not abused.

Opening Communication Channels

Trusting in the responsibility and good faith of other members of the church was implicit in the new style of Dutch episcopal leadership. And because this trust was maintained and strengthened by a uniquely open internal communication network the Dutch church was able to discuss freely many of the problems which it faced. As Coleman demonstrates, the extraordinary elan displayed by the church between 1966 and 1970 was directly related to a marked increase in the intra-chruch volume of information flow and the number of information channels. The process establishing the Dutch Pastoral Council was a process of stimulating discussion, argument and dialogue among all sectors of the church. In talking freely and openly to each other Dutch Catholics were strengthening their sense of community.

Conflict in the Church

Of course there were conflicts. There were internal conflicts between traditionalists and progressives. Some groups refused to be guided by the bishops. There were also clashes with Rome, notably over the question of the doctrinal acceptability of the *New Dutch Catechism for Adults,* and over the laicization of clergy. In these conflicts control over information played an important role. In the Rome-Holland disputes, for example, the Dutch bishops relied on favourable press publicity and a policy of giving the fullest information to the public as a tactic to counter Roman attempts to conduct the dispute in secrecy.

A More Open Church

Coleman's study raises many important questions about the functioning of information in the church. He demonstrates clearly that opening up the internal information process is not necessarily a good means of ensuring a quiet life for the church. A more open communication system will reveal conflicts of opinion, pluriformity of attitudes and plurality of parties. It will challenge accepted power and authority structures, and bishops, priests religious and laity will be faced with a church that looks more like a secular political community.

On the plus side, opening up channels of information can liberate the goodwill and enthusiasm of all the church members. After the reforms of Vatican II there cannot be a return to a closed authoritarian style of church leadership. Diffusion of information control, and the development of a responsible public opinion within the church is not only desirable but necessary for the well-being of the Christian community.

The Church as a Place of Freedom

Avery Dulles. *A Church To Believe In: Discipleship and the Dynamics of Freedom.* (New York: Crossroad Pub. Co., 1982).

Attempts to develop a right to information inside the church raise the question of how far notions of freedom and rights from secular society can be applied to an institution of divine origin. The traditional answer is that civil rights and freedoms cannot easily, if at all, be incorporated into the church. In particular, any idea of introducing a more democratic form of government would be incompatible with the essentially hierarchial nature of church authority. The true meaning of freedom in the church is one of the key problems taken up by Avery Dulles in *A Church to Believe In.*

Because of its repeated insistence upon the value of human freedom, and because it so clearly endorsed civil freedoms of inquiry, opinion, communication and religious belief, Vatican Council II inevitably prompted questions about freedom in the church. The Council even went further than traditional liberal doctrines of human rights by proclaiming that human liberty is rooted in divine revelation and the Christian understanding of the nature and dignity of the person.

Following the Council, and drawing inspiration from many of its decrees — especially *Dignitatis Humanae* (on religious liberty), and *Gaudiam et Spes* (the church in the modern world) — attempts were made to establish a doctrine of freedom in the church. Some people even argued for a church bill of rights. The fruits of this movement are now being made apparent in the new code of canon law.[1]

Freedom and the Church's Corporate Witness

Dulles maintains that discussion about freedom in the church must be grounded in a clear understanding of the theological notion of freedom. He looks at the biblical roots of freedom and finds that Christian freedom can also involve seemingly contradictory notions such as obedience, commitment, and personal sacrifice. Christian freedom cannot be simply equated with 'indetermination, autonomy, and personal fulfillment'. The freedom that is based on and proceeds from the love of God is the only truly Christian liberty.

Given these basic theological propositions it is clear that a secular concept of freedom can at most be applied only analogously to the ecclesiastical domain. A central way in which the church differs from secular states is that it is a community having a corporate faith and witness. Moreover, the members of this community are not free to revise the nature and goals of this faith and witness. That nature and those goals have been set for the community by "God's redeeming work in Jesus Christ, of which the Church is herald and promoter".

Church Communication and the Media

One area in which the issue of freedom is most acute is the question of how far it is legitimate for theologians to differ from the church authorities on matters of doctrine. This problem is intimately connected with that of determining how far a right to information in the church is also a freedom to communicate ideas and opinions which may be judged erroneous or injurious to people's faith. A complicating factor which has arisen in recent years is the influence of the democratic ideal on basic attitudes. Many people instinctively feel that church doctrine ought not to be controlled by a hierarchy that acts without the consent of the governed.

This 'democratic' attitude is given more weight by its expression and dissemination in the modern mass media. It is not possible for the present-day church to retain control over the news and information that is circulated about its doings. Religious news is treated by the secular media in the same way as they treat other forms of news. Religious disputes are subject to the same kinds of categorization and exposition as are economic or political arguments. Inevitably the media simplify and condense complicated discussions about theological principle into formulae which emphasise the so-called clash of personalities or of ideologies. Unfortunately for the church many of its members get their information about religious matters only from the secular media.

In this environment differences of opinion which occur between theologians and the hierarchy are subject to the pressures of publicity and to a consequent involvement of the general public. Within the church itself, parties can develop which exacerbate the problem by militantly supporting one 'side' or the other. Complex issues easily become gladitorial combats.

Theological Freedom and Authority

Dulles tries to place the question of theological freedom in perspective. He carefully sets out what he considers to be the distinctive concerns and orientations of the theologians and the hierarchy. In the best sense of the word the hierarchy (the 'official magisterium') will be 'conservative': anxious to preserve the continuity of church tradition and to defend and uphold established doctrine. Theologians on the other hand will tend to look for new ways to make old doctrine speak to contemporary people, and they will be looking to update received formulations of faith. Theologians and hierarchy need each other, for it is in the tension between the demands of continuity and the need for fresh insights that the church's witness is renewed.

1 An important section in Book 2 of the new code (The People of God) deals with the rights and obligations of the faithful. Among the rights mentioned as being common to all the faithful is that of 'making known one's opinion on matters pertaining to the good of the Church, ... the right to one's good name, the right to be judged in accordance with the law, ... (and) rights acknowledged specifically to the laity, like the right (and the obligation) to proclaim the message of salvation ... *(The New Code of Canon Law: An Invitation and a Challenge* [London: Catholic Truth Society, 1983]).

Rules of Freedom

As for the guiding principles which should govern the exercise of authority in the church, Dulles proposes four 'rules of thumb' which should help preserve an atmosphere of freedom. Within this atmosphere a right to information, for example, would find its proper place.

The 'rules' are: first, freedom "should be respected as far as possible and curtailed only when and insofar as necessary", (Declaration on Religious Liberty). This would mean, for example, that the church should distinguish clearly between doctrines that are unconditionally binding on all and those which are open to questioning or challenge.

Second, church authorities should consult more before making binding disciplinary or doctrinal decisions. Without such open consultations it is easy to make erroneous decisions which may then require undue pressure to enforce. Freedom can flourish best in an open atmosphere; undue secrecy merely serves to confirm an insecure authority.

Third, decisions, once made, should be set out in a way that will invite a free and reasoned assent. Attempting to compel assent by invoking penalties or anathemas is likely to convince observers that the church is not a truly free society. In the words of Pope John XXIII to the Vatican Council the church 'considers that she meets the needs of the present day by demonstrating the validity of her teaching rather than by condemnations.'

Finally, church authorities should make provision for responsible criticism. Such free criticism can only strengthen respect for authority. Suppression of criticism, on the other hand, is usually ineffective and, in addition, arouses suspicion and resentment.

By following such 'rules of thumb' Dulles believes, the church can strengthen its claim to be a real place of freedom, and, as a community of disciples, manifest its freedom to the rest of the world.

The Modern Church and the Right to Information: A Selection from Official Texts 1950-1979

1 Speech *'This audience will not'*, of Pius XII, 23 January 1950

'... today, when communication has become so easy and far-reaching, and the influence of the ordinary citizen is being felt more and more in the government of nations. That influence in proportion to its weight imposes a duty to acquaint oneself with the true facts; and that duty confers a right to be told the truth'.

2 *Pacem in Terris.* Encyclical letter of Pope John XXIII, 1963.

'... he (man) can claim as a natural right that he be shown the respect he deserves and that his reputation be not undermined. He can insist, likewise, on freedom to search for truth and — within the limits imposed by the moral order and the common good — to publish his opinions ... He has also the right to be told the truth about public events.'

3 *Decree on the Instruments of Social Communication (Inter Mirifica) 1963*

'5 ... there exists within human society a right to information about affairs which affect men individually or collectively, and according to the circumstances of each ...'

4 *The Church and the Media of Mass Communication* (Appendix XI to the WCC Uppsala Report) 1968.

'... the churches themselves, in their information policies and practices, are under obligation to make information freely available. Except for such areas as, e.g. privileged communication in confession, the churches should not be afraid of exposing their own life to public scrutiny. The churches must not apply to other institutions principles which they are not prepared to practice in their own affairs.'

5 *Communio et Progressio. Pastoral Instruction on the Means of Social Communication, 1971.*

'Society, at all levels, requires information if it is to choose the right course. The community requires well-informed citizens. The right to information is not merely the prerogative of the individual, it is essential to the public interest'.

'Since the development of public opinion within the church is essential, individual Catholics have the right to all the information they need to play their active role in the life of the Church'.

'On those occasions when the affairs of the Church require secrecy, the rules normal in civil affairs equally apply.
On the other hand, the spiritual riches which are an essential attribute of the Church demand that the news she gives out of her intentions as well as of her words be distinguished by integrity, truth and openness.'

'When ecclesiastical authorities are unwilling to give information or are unable to do so, then rumour is unloosed and rumour is not a bearer of the truth but carries dangerous half-truths. Secrecy should therefore be restricted to matters that involve the good name of individuals or that touch upon the rights of people whether singly or collectively'.

6 Speech *"Nous vous remercions"* of Paul VI, 24 January 1973.

'The right to information which has been proclaimed and stated, finds its application in the Church herself: while being a hierarchial institution acting in the name of Christ, isn't she also a human community, needing dialogue and participation?

There are obviously limits, required by discretion and the common good, even more in the Church than in other societies. The reason for this is simple. It is true that the Church must know well the world at which her pastoral activity is directed and that she must enlist the cooperation of her children, but her decisions are based on the Gospel and on her living Tradition, not on the spirit of the world nor a public opinion which often overlooks the complexity of the theological problems in question.'

7 Third General Conference of Latin American Bishops (Puebla). *Evangelization at Present and in the Future of Latin America,* 1979.

'Enunciating the basic rights of the human person today and in the future is an indispensable part of the Church's evangelizing mission, and it will ever remain so. The Church proclaims the necessity of the following rights, among others, and their implementation ... the right ... to freedom of opinion ... to one's own image, to a good reputation, to privacy, to information and objective expression.'