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Ten keys for communicating faith

Passing on the faith is a very long-standing issue, one that has been present throughout the two-thousand-year history of the Christian community.

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The Church has always seen herself as a messenger, entrusted with news that has been revealed to her and is worth passing on. An old issue, then, but also a hot topic today. From Paul VI to Benedict XVI, the Popes have not failed to point out the need to

improve the way we communicate our faith to others.

Often, this question is connected to the "new evangelization". In this context, John Paul II said that the communication of the faith must be new "in its ardor, its methods, and its expression" (Speech to the Assembly of CELAM in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, March 9, 1983). This article will refer in particular to newness of methods.

There are external factors that hinder the spread of the Christian message, on which it is difficult to make any impact. But with other factors, which are within our reach, there is scope for progress. If we want to pass on to others the Christian experience of faith, first of all we need knowledge of the faith that we desire to pass on, and we must also know the rules governing public communication.

Based on the one hand on the most important Church documents and, on the other, on the essential reference points in the field of corporate communication, I shall put forward a number of principles. The first set refer to the message being broadcast, then to the person who is doing the communicating, and the last ones to the way that message is to be conveyed to the public. Above all, the message must be positive. The general public receive all kinds of information, and take note of protests and criticism. But what receives the greatest following are positive projects, proposals and causes.

Characteristics of the message

1. Positive

John Paul II said in his Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris consortio* that morality is a path to happiness, not a series of prohibitions. This idea has

been frequently repeated by Benedict XVI, in different ways: God gives us everything and does not take away anything; the teaching of the Church is not a set of limitations, but a light that is received in freedom.

The Christian message has to be transmitted as it is: a huge "Yes!" to men, to women, to life, freedom, peace, development, solidarity, the virtues ... To pass it on properly to others, we must first understand and experience the faith in this positive way ourselves. In this context some words of Cardinal Ratzinger take on particular meaning: "The force that carries the truth to others must be the joy that is its clearest expression. Christians should stake everything on truth, and it should be passed on to the world with joy." Communication through the radiance of joy is the most positive approach of all.

2. Relevant

Secondly, the message must be relevant and meaningful for the listener, not just for the speaker. Thomas Aquinas says there are two types of communication: locutio, a flow of words that do not interest those who listen, and illuminatio, which is saying something that enlightens the minds and hearts of the listeners on some aspect that really affects them.

Communicating the faith is not arguing to beat an opponent, but having a dialogue to convince someone of the truth. The attitude of the speaker (or writer) is a desire to persuade without defeating.

Listening is fundamental: it enables us to learn what interests or concerns the other person. We have to listen to their questions before proposing any answers. The opposite of relevance is self-referencing. Just

talking about ourselves is not a good basis for dialogue.

3. Clear

Thirdly, the message has to be clear. Communication is not primarily what the communicator says, but what the recipient understands. It applies in all fields of knowledge (science, technology, economy, etc.) – to communicate we need to avoid complexity and obscure language. In religious matters too, we need to look for clear arguments and simple words. For this purpose we should recognize the value of rhetoric, literature, metaphors, movies, advertising, images, and symbols, in spreading the Christian message.

At times, communication fails because it shifts the responsibility onto the receiver: the communicator considers others as being incapable of understanding. Our rule should be the opposite: to strive to become

clearer and clearer in what we say, until we reach our objective.

Qualities of the person who communicates

1. Credibility

For a recipient to accept a message, the person or organization that offers it has to merit credibility. And since credibility is based on truthfulness and moral integrity, underlying lies and suspicion negate the communication process. The loss of credibility is one of the most serious consequences of the crises that have occurred in recent years.

2. Empathy

The second principle is empathy. Communication is a relationship established between people, not an anonymous mechanism for the dissemination of ideas. The Gospel is addressed to people: politicians and

voters, journalists and readers. People with their own views, feelings and emotions. Speaking in cold, impersonal terms creates a widening gap between speaker and listener. An African writer has said that maturity lies in the ability to discover that we can wound others, and acting accordingly. Our society is overpopulated with broken hearts and bewildered minds. We need to approach physical pain and mental suffering with the utmost sensitivity. Empathy does not mean giving up our convictions, but putting ourselves in the other person's place. In today's society, the answers that will convince people are the ones that are both sensible and humane.

3. Courtesy

The third principle relating to the communicator is courtesy, good manners. We know from experience how personal insults proliferate in

public debate. In a context like that, if we do not take care of the way we treat people, we run the risk of making the Christian standpoint be seen as just another fundamentalist position. Even at the risk of sounding naive, I think it is very necessary to distance ourselves from such a context. Clarity is not incompatible with kindness.

With kindness we can hold a conversation; without kindness, failure is guaranteed from the outset. The person who was on our side before the debate, will be afterwards, and the person who was against us will seldom change his or her mind. I remember seeing a poster at the entrance of a pub near Windsor Castle, in the UK, which said, more or less: "Gentlemen are welcome here. And a gentleman is one both before drinking beer and afterwards." One could add that a gentleman is one

both when people agree with him and when they contradict him.

Principles on how to communicate

1. Professionalism

“Gaudium et Spes” recalls that every human activity has its own nature, which we need to discover, use and respect if we want to take part in it. Each field of knowledge has its methodology, each activity has its rules, and each profession has its mindset. Evangelization is not divorced from human reality, but takes place from within: politicians, businessmen, journalists, teachers, writers, and trade unionists, are those who can make practical improvements in their respective fields.

St Josemaría Escrivá recalled that it is individual people, committed to their beliefs and to their profession, who find the right approaches and

solutions. If it is a parliamentary debate, they do so on political grounds; if it is a medical debate, they do so with scientific arguments, and so on. This principle applies to the field of communications, which has developed remarkably in recent years, both in the increasingly quality of its narrative and in its growing audiences, with increasingly broad and active citizen participation.

2 . Intersection

The second principle might be called intersection. Professionalism is a must when a debate focuses on religious convictions. Intersection is needed when political convictions are focused on. At this point, it is worth mentioning the situation of Italy. On filling in their income tax forms, over 80% of Italians check the “Church” box, because they want to support its activities financially. That

means that the Church has earned the confidence of a majority of Italian citizens, not just those who belong to a political party.

3. Gradualness

The third principle of good communications is gradualness. Social trends have a complex life: they are born, grow, develop, change and die. Consequently, communicating ideas has a lot to do with gardening: sowing, watering, pruning, cleaning, waiting; before the harvest comes.

The phenomenon of secularization has strengthened in recent centuries. Processes that have such a long gestation period are not resolved in a matter of years, months or weeks. Cardinal Ratzinger explained that our worldview tends to follow a “masculine” paradigm, where what matters is action, effectiveness, programming and speed. He

concluded that more space should be given to a “feminine” paradigm, because women know that everything to do with life requires waiting and patience.

The opposite of this principle is the hustle and short-sightedness that lead to impatience and often discouragement, because it is impossible to achieve major objectives in the short term.

4. Charity

To these nine principles there has to be added another that affects all of the above: the message, the communicator, and how to communicate. It is the principle of charity. Some authors have noted that in the first centuries the Church spread very quickly because it was a welcoming community, where people could experience love and freedom. Catholics treated others with love; they cared for children, the poor, the

elderly and the sick. All this was irresistibly attractive.

Charity is the content, the method and the style of all communication of faith. Charity makes the Christian message positive, relevant and attractive. It provides credibility, empathy and kindness to the people doing the communicating, and it is the force that enables them to be patient, integral and open. The world we live in is all too often a cold, hard place where many people feel excluded and battered, and feel the need for light and warmth. In this world, Catholics' great argument is charity. Thanks to charity, evangelization is always truly new.

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