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The Media and the Family: A Risk and a Richness

On the feast of St. Francis of Sales, patron of journalists, the Holy See published Pope John Paul II's message for the 38th World Communications Day. Excerpts follow.

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The extraordinary growth of the communications media and their increased availability has brought exceptional opportunities for

enriching the lives not only of individuals, but also of families. At the same time, families today face new challenges arising from the varied and often contradictory messages presented by the mass media. The theme chosen for the 2004 World Communications Day – “The Media and the Family: A Risk and a Richness” - is a timely one, for it invites sober reflection on the use which families make of the media and, in turn, on the way that families and family concerns are treated by the media.

This year's theme is also a reminder to everyone, both communicators and those whom they address, that all communication has a moral dimension. As the Lord himself has said, it is from the abundance of the heart that the mouth speaks (cf. Mt 12:34-35). People grow or diminish in moral stature by the words which

they speak and the messages which they choose to hear. ...

Thanks to the unprecedented expansion of the communications market in recent decades, many families throughout the world, even those of quite modest means, now have access in their own homes to immense and varied media resources. ...

Yet these same media also have the capacity to do grave harm to families by presenting an inadequate or even deformed outlook on life, on the family, on religion and on morality. This power either to reinforce or override traditional values like religion, culture, and family was clearly seen by the Second Vatican Council.... Communication in any form must always be inspired by the ethical criterion of respect for the truth and for the dignity of the human person.

These considerations apply in particular to the treatment of the family in the media. On the one hand, marriage and family life are frequently depicted in a sensitive manner, realistic but also sympathetic, that celebrates virtues like love, fidelity, forgiveness, and generous self-giving for others....

On the other hand, the family and family life are all too often inadequately portrayed in the media. Infidelity, sexual activity outside of marriage, and the absence of a moral and spiritual vision of the marriage covenant are depicted uncritically, while positive support is at times given to divorce, contraception, abortion and homosexuality. ...

It is not so easy to resist commercial pressures or the demands of conformity to secular ideologies, but that is what responsible communicators must do....

Public authorities themselves have a serious duty to uphold marriage and the family for the sake of society itself. Instead, many now accept and act upon the unsound libertarian arguments of groups which advocate practices which contribute to the grave phenomenon of family crisis and the weakening of the very concept of the family. Without resorting to censorship, it is imperative that public authorities set in place regulatory policies and procedures to ensure that the media do not act against the good of the family. Family representatives should be part of this policy-making. ...

The mission of parents

Parents, as the primary and most important educators of their children, are also the first to teach them about the media. They are called to train their offspring in the

“moderate, critical, watchful and prudent use of the media” in the home (Familiaris Consortio, 76). When parents do that consistently and well, family life is greatly enriched. ...

In view of their great power to shape ideas and influence behaviour, professional communicators should recognize that they have a moral responsibility not only to give families all possible encouragement, assistance, and support to that end, but also to exercise wisdom, good judgement and fairness in their presentation of issues involving sexuality, marriage and family life.

The media are welcomed daily as a familiar guest in many homes and families. On this World Communications Day I encourage professional communicators and families alike to acknowledge this

unique privilege and the
accountability which it entails....

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