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Nine Keys for Communicating Faith

An article published in
"L'Osservatore Romano" on
how to communicate the
Christian message effectively
and convincingly in the context
of today's society.

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*From an article published in
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The Church has always seen herself as a messenger, entrusted with good news that has been revealed to her and that needs to be passed on to others. This is an old issue, then, but also a pressing concern today. From Paul VI to Benedict XVI, recent 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.

Certainly, external factors today hinder the spread of the Christian message, factors that are difficult to eliminate in the short run. 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 a deep knowledge of the faith that we desire to pass on, and we must also know the rules governing effective communication.

Drawing both on recent important Church documents and on the essential reference points of effective communication, I will offer here a number of principles. The first set refer to the message being broadcast, then to the person who is doing the communicating, and finally to the way that message is to be conveyed to the public.

Above all, the message must be positive. The general public receives all kinds of information, and takes note of protests and criticism. But what receives the greatest attention 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 stressed by Benedict XVI: 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 all men and women, to life, freedom, peace, development, solidarity, the

virtues. To pass it on effectively to others, we must first understand and experience the faith in this positive way ourselves. In this context some words of then 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. This 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. Therefore 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. 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, lies and suspicions always undermine

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 may still agree with us afterwards, but the person who was against us will seldom change his or her mind. I remember seeing a sign at the entrance to a pub near Windsor Castle, in the UK, which said, more or less: "Gentlemen are welcome here. And one is a gentleman both before drinking beer and afterwards." We could add that one is a gentleman 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, each has to solve the problems that arise in their respective fields.

St Josemaría Escrivá insisted that it is individual people, committed to their beliefs and to their own profession, who will find the right approaches and solutions for today's problems. 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 also applies to the field of communications, which has developed remarkably in recent years, both in its growing quality and increasingly broad and active citizen participation.

2. Gradualness

The second 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 in common 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 said that our world view 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.

3. Charity

Charity is a principle that affects all of the above: the message, the communicator, and how to communicate. 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 effective 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 and open. The world we live in is all too often a cold, hard place where many people feel excluded and battered, and long for light and warmth. In today's world, the greatest argument of Christians is charity. Thanks to charity, evangelization is always truly new.

Images are from the University of Navarra photograph collection.

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