Talking Sense: Language, Diversity and Dialogue in a Digital Culture

The last twenty-five years have seen an exponential rate of development in the capacities of the technologies available to support and facilitate human communication. The combination of these developments in mobile telephony, computer technology, fibre-optics and satellites mean that many of us now carry with us devices that allow us instant access to an extra-ordinary range of information, news and opinion from around the globe and that enable us to communicate by word, text or the sharing of images with people and institutions in every corner of the world. This revolution in information and communication technologies, however, cannot be adequately understood merely in instrumental terms: it is not simply a question of communication and the exchange of information growing in terms of volume, speed, efficiency and accessibility but rather that we are also witnessing concomitant changes in the ways in which people use these technologies to communicate, learn and interact – we are living through a change of paradigm in the very culture of communication.

In his Message for this year’s World Communications Day, Pope Benedict highlighted and celebrated the extraordinary potential of the new technologies, if they are used to promote human understanding and solidarity. In particular, he noted that the new technologies have also opened the way for dialogue between people from different countries, cultures and religions. The new digital arena, the so-called cyberspace, allows them to encounter and to know each other’s traditions and values.¹ In this reflection, I wish to consider some of the challenges to which we must be attentive if the new technologies are to realize their undoubted potential to provide a platform for a global public square or forum where a truly inclusive human conversation or dialogue might emerge. My primary concern will not be with the technical constraints that must be

overcome but rather with the cultural challenges\textsuperscript{2}: initially, the focus will be on those challenges that are specific to the culture of digital communications and this will be followed by a consideration of those challenges that have long been identified in debates about the language of the public forum.

I would like to commence, however, on a more positive note by underlining the fact that one of the great drivers of the growth of the new media has been their use by young people, in particular, as means of personal communication. The phenomenal expansion of social networking sites testifies to the desire of young people for connectedness, for friendship and for human relationships. This desire, notwithstanding the casual and superficial nature of much of the actual communication, is ultimately an expression of the truth of human nature; the desire for connectedness is innate in human beings. From the perspective of theology, it can be presented as a manifestation of our created nature; made in the image and likeness of God, a God whose essence is relational, human beings desire union with each other and are called at the heart of their being to be persons of love. In a digital context, the language of Pope Benedict during his visit to Australia for World Youth day in 2008 is particularly appropriate: \textit{Loving is what we are programmed to do, what we were designed for by our Creator}.\textsuperscript{3} The truth of this insight into what it means to be human – that all people, irrespective of creed, race or culture, have a fundamental disposition to seek unity and understanding - gives us an ultimate ground to hope that universal forms of dialogue can yield fruit even in the face of the challenges that we must acknowledge.

The single greatest challenge to dialogue is the, often unarticulated, relativism that is so prevalent in Western culture and the refutation of which has been a key element in the teaching of Pope Benedict. If there is no such thing as truth, as right or wrong answers,

\textsuperscript{2} It is important to remember that these technologies are not available to all. If they are to serve to ensure true human development and solidarity, then there must be a sustained effort to ensure that they are available to all. \textit{It would be a tragedy for the future of humanity if the new instruments of communication, which permit the sharing of knowledge and information in a more rapid and effective manner, were not made accessible to those who are already economically and socially marginalized, or if it would contribute only to increasing the gap that separates those people from the new network that is developing at the service of human socialization, of information and of understanding.}

\textsuperscript{3} Pope Benedict XVI, Meeting with disadvantaged youth, Sydney, 18th July 2008.
then dialogue becomes meaningless. It is a shared commitment to searching for truth, rooted in the conviction of the ultimate objectivity of truth, which gives human dialogue and debate their ultimate value - otherwise they become exercises in coercion and manipulation in which each seeks to assert his or her own view without any reference to the claims of truth. The generalized and uncritical social reception of the tenets of relativism finds particular expression in the digital world where the sheer volume of information and opinion, much of it contradictory, can lead to an almost resigned acceptance that it is meaningless to speak of truth and objectivity. In the face of so much assertion, argument and counter argument, it is difficult to decide where real authority and expertise resides. Given the doubtful, and often anonymous, provenance of much of what appears in cyberspace, it becomes very easy for those who wish to deceive and manipulate to disseminate their views. The British philosopher, Onora O’Neill, has observed the serious social risks that result: *If the media mislead, or if readers cannot assess their reporting, the wells of public discourse and public life are poisoned. The new information technologies may be anti-authoritarian, but curiously they are often used in ways that are also anti-democratic. They undermine our capacities to judge others’ claims and to place our trust.*

One common response to this phenomenon is that people turn only to sources of information and opinion that they judge to be trustworthy. This is a natural and understandable approach but it is not without risk. Often the judgement as to what sources are trustworthy is rooted in the person’s pre-established world view and serves only to confirm people in their opinions rather than leading to a real search for truth and understanding. In the political arena, there is the risk that people will only engage with media that they know to support their particular views and they will not be exposed to alternative positions or to reasoned debate or discussion. This is turn will create increasingly polarized and confrontational forms of politics where there is little room for the voices of moderation or consensus. A similar phenomenon is emerging in the world of Catholic media, especially in the blogosphere, where often it seems not enough for protagonists to propose their own views and beliefs but where they tend also to attack the

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arguments, and even the person, of those who disagree with them. It is natural that debates about faith and morals should be full of conviction and passion but there is a growing risk that some forms of expression are damaging the unity of the Church and, moreover, are unlikely to draw the curious and the seekers to a desire to learn about the Church and its message.

A particular challenge to the possibility of the new media serving as channels for dialogue and growth in understanding between peoples is that the extraordinary range of words and images generated by these media, the speed with which they are produced and the fact there is a constant stream of news and information means that there is very little room and time for a sustained and considered engagement and that there is real danger that our cultural discourse becomes superficial. The American Archbishop, Charles Chaput, has expressed this risk succinctly: *Visual and electronic media, today’s dominant media, need a certain kind of content. They thrive on brevity, speed, change, urgency, variety and feelings. But thinking requires the opposite. Thinking takes time. It needs silence and the methodical skills of logic.*

The gradual loss of the boundary between the provision of information and entertainment witnesses, and further contributes, to a loss of a social appetite for serious engagement with important issues. Media attention can also be very fickle and one seemingly compelling issue is abandoned as another is judged more likely to engage audiences. Is it merely a coincidence that the concentrated media focus on the protests in Iran after the Presidential elections in June and the resultant public awareness and concern seem to have ended when Michael Jackson died?

These aforementioned features of the digital culture present a formidable obstacle to those who wish to use the new media to speak of meaning and truth, to share their faith and beliefs. In 1990, Pope John Paul II had already identified the particular challenge to those who wish to make known the message of Christ: *It is also necessary to integrate that message into the “new culture” created by modern communications. This is a complex issue, since the ”new culture” originates not just from whatever content is*

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5 http://www.archden.org/index.cfm/ID/2417
eventually expressed, but from the very fact that there exist new ways of communicating, with new languages, new techniques and a new psychology. For the Church, the challenge is to find a language that is appropriate for this new forum but that does not betray the depths and nuances of the message that has been entrusted to it. In many ways the Church’s message is more radically counter-cultural than ever – the Church speaks of truth in an environment where skepticism is the norm, it seeks to speak to all in a milieu where the focus is on niche markets and interest groups and it invites people to commitment in a world where novelty reigns.

The need to find a new “language” is not new for people of faith. Throughout its history, the Church has learned to proclaim the unchanging message of Christ in new idioms and in ways that respond to different cultural contexts. The Church has long been “multi-lingual”. The new language, in which it must be fluent in order to be present in the new forum of ideas and information, will stand beside the other languages of its tradition. Those who are concerned that the language of the digital culture is too banal or ephemeral to translate the profundity of the Christian message should remember that it is not a language that will substitute the precise language of dogma and theology or the rich language of homiletics or liturgy but rather will serve to establish an initial point of contact with those who are far from faith. Those who respond to this initial contact will be invited to more profound forms of engagement, where they will learn these other languages in their proper context. The Chief Rabbi of Britain, Jonathan Sacks, makes an instructive distinction between the language of “broadcasting” where the aim is to engage the general public and that of “narrowcasting” where the focus is on those who already share our worldview.\(^6\)

\(^6\) Anyone who has ever delivered a religious broadcast knows how difficult it is to speak to an unknown and open audience. To our fellow believers we can address words of fire; to a wider public only the vaguest generalities. Broadcasting as opposed to narrowcasting is low on authenticity. But if we are to have a public culture, and one with a religious dimension, it is a discipline we have to undergo. We have to learn to speak to those we do not hope to convert, but with whom we wish to live. Narrowcasting frees us from that burden. But it moves us nearer a situation in which opinion is ghettoized into segmented audiences, and where the increase of choice means that we only have to listen to voices with which we agree. Jonathan Sacks, The Persistence of Faith, London, 1991, p64.
Within the Church, we are accustomed to the use of texts as our primary language of communication. Many of the websites that have been developed by different Church institutions continue to use that language. One can find on the web many wonderful homilies, speeches and articles but it is not clear if they speak to a younger audience that is fluent in a different language; a language rooted in the convergence of text, sound and images. Many of the texts have been shaped with a particular audience in mind, an audience that is willing to study and analyze the text, but their appeal can be limited to those who are browsing and who will move on very quickly if their attention has not been immediately engaged. The difficulties are compounded when the actual texts use a vocabulary and forms of expression that are experienced as unintelligible and off-putting even by sympathetic audiences but the deeper problem is precisely about the over-reliance on texts. In meeting this challenge the Church will look to the example of Christ, who spoke to his contemporaries with words, stories and parables but also through his deeds and actions. Moreover, the Church can turn to its rich heritage of art and music. Just as the stain glass images of the medieval cathedrals spoke to an illiterate audience, we must find forms of expression that are appropriate to a generation that has been described as “post-literate”. Learning any new language involves an element of risk, embarrassing mistakes are often a feature of such learning, but the alternative is to risk talking exclusively to ourselves.

The new media undoubtedly offer the Church a greater opportunity to make known its teaching more widely and more directly to ever greater numbers and across all types of political and cultural boundaries. It is possible, using the new technologies, to reach new audiences\(^\text{7}\), to invite them to a consideration of the great questions concerning the meaning and purpose of life and to offer to them the great wisdom of our tradition. We need to understand better how our message is being heard and understood by different audiences. *We have always, and rightly, been attentive to the content of our teaching; today we must be more attentive to our audience, or the multiple audiences we address, and understand their concerns and questions. We need to understand better, and take*

\(^\text{7}\) I have to concede a certain unease about my use of the word *audience*. It has resonances of a type of passivity which is not particularly appropriate in describing those who are most typically engaged by new media and who are often both consumers and producers of content. In this article, it is intended to refer to all one’s possible interlocutors in the digital arena.
account of, the contexts and environments in which they will encounter our message. The emergence of the internet as an interactive medium, where users seek to engage as subjects and not just as consumers, invites us to develop more explicitly dialogical forms of teaching and presentation.8

In learning to speak the languages of the new media, believers are preparing the way not just for their own effective use of the new media as tools for evangelization but also to for the promotion of that universal discussion and debate that is necessary if these media are to realize their potential to serve the good of all people. As Pope Benedict observed in his recent letter on integral human development: Just because social communications increase the possibilities of interconnection and the dissemination of ideas, it does not follow that they promote freedom or internationalize development and democracy for all. To achieve goals of this kind, they need to focus on promoting the dignity of persons and peoples, they need to be clearly inspired by charity and placed at the service of truth, of the good, and of natural and supernatural fraternity.9 Believers need to bring the insights of our faith to the debate about human dignity, but if it is to be effective it must be done using a language that is accessible to those who do not share our faith but would share our concern for the good of the human community. This is a challenge that is not confined to the arena of digital media and it is a problem that the Church has experience in confronting. Within our Catholic tradition, we are fortunate that many of our ethical teachings, in particular, have been formulated within the natural moral law tradition and are rooted in an anthropology that invites the engagement of all who share our conviction about the centrality of reason.

Many commentators have spoken of the need for people of faith to acquire two languages; a first language of citizenship which enables them to engage with all others in the public forum and a second language that can be shared with those who are of the same tradition. The first language is often less rich than the language of our scriptures and of our liturgies but it permits a continuing conversation between those who make up

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9 Caritas in veritate, 73.
society. As Jonathan Sacks argues in the context of British society: Keeping this first language alive means significant restraints on all sides. For Christians, it means allowing other voices to share in the conversation. For people of other faiths it means coming to terms with a national culture. For secularists, it means acknowledging the force of commitments that must, to them, seem irrational. For everyone, it means settling for less than we would seek if everyone were like us, and searching for more than our mere sectional interests: in short, for the common good.\footnote{Jonathan Sacks, The Persistence of Faith, London, 1991, p68.} The use of this first language is not to be confused with the tendency among some secularist to exclude religious language or the insights of religious faith from the public forum but rather represents a balance between intolerant forms of secularism and fundamentalism. Pope Benedict has touched this argument: Denying the right to profess one's religion in public and the right to bring the truths of faith to bear upon public life has negative consequences for true development. The exclusion of religion from the public square — and, at the other extreme, religious fundamentalism — hinders an encounter between persons and their collaboration for the progress of humanity. ... Secularism and fundamentalism exclude the possibility of fruitful dialogue and effective cooperation between reason and religious faith. Reason always stands in need of being purified by faith: this also holds true for political reason, which must not consider itself omnipotent. For its part, religion always needs to be purified by reason in order to show its authentically human face. Any breach in this dialogue comes only at an enormous price to human development\footnote{Caritas in veritate, 56. The Pope’s reflection on this consideration shows a profound continuity with the language of the then Cardinal Ratzinger in 1998: Whenever a religiously motivated moralism sidesteps this often irreducible pluralism, declaring one way to be the only right one, then religion is perverted into an ideological dictatorship, whose totalitarian passion does not build peace, but destroys it. Man makes God the servant of his own aims, thereby degrading God and himself. Interreligious dialogue and Jewish-Christian Relationships, Communio, 1998.}.