

WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY LECTURE 2010

GOOD COMMUNICATIONS BUILD COMMUNITY “WHY THE MEDIA MATTERS”

*Allen Hall Seminary, Diocese of Westminster
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Archbishop Vincent Nichols, President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of England and Wales, delivered the following lecture to gathered media professionals at the Diocese of Westminster's Allen Hall seminary on Tuesday 4 May 2010.

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This is a pivotal moment in the life of our countries, as we stand on the verge of the General Election. So you will not be surprised if this is the focus on my brief talk this evening.

We have been much occupied in the last four weeks or so with the campaign. In it the media has played a major part with its continuous report and instant analysis. Indeed, while I personally have no clear view of the actual impact of the TV debates on the outcome of the election, they have certainly been a new and striking feature of these weeks.

One effect has been to bring the personalities of the three leaders into very sharp focus, and then to bring them face to face with questions from a general audience. Some may have preferred a different kind of questioning – one that pushed on into more detail in more of an in-depth interview format. But what we have been given has been fascinating and, I believe, quite instructive, at one level.

REBUILDING TRUST

This interaction with the 'general public' is of course quite crucial, given that one of the issues we face as a society is that of the rebuilding of trust in our political institutions. I hope the debates may have helped to demonstrate that politicians are people, swayed this way and that by the same factors that sway us all. And when we come face to face with individuals, then we can gauge again the manner and extent of our trust of them. The political institutions as such can hardly gain our confidence unless the individuals within them do so.

The media, of course, play a crucial role in all of this. They unpack the Party Manifestos and explain policy to all in society. It was the media which brought to light the abuses of the parliamentary expenses system which has done so much to weaken trust. The media, of course, is not a monolith. While most of my comments, I suppose, have the news media in mind, we should not ignore the more reflective and creative sides of the media. The media is also very powerful in enabling us to see and get to know our politicians and, therefore, in the role of rebuilding trust.

In our document 'Choosing the Common Good', the bishops of England and Wales reflected on this task of rebuilding trust. But our focus was not simply on the question

of trust in our political institutions. We also were aware of a more general erosion of trust – between individuals, between the citizen and the state, and in our institutions.

We said:

‘Trust has been severely eroded. However, if we go on down a path where we cannot believe anything good of anybody, we will ultimately create a world of individuals fighting for their own good at the expense of every other person. Society cannot change for the better without restoring trust...The challenge for society is to build up structures and institutions so that they command the same respect and trust as the individuals who represent them best. We know it can be done, but it requires a new sense of service of others at the heart of our institutions’.

LEADERSHIP

A new Parliament is clearly an opportunity to move in that direction. And in that movement the role of leaders is crucial. This is true for leaders in every type of institution, for leaders set the tone and help shape the culture of the institutions they lead, especially by the appeal they make to others: to hopes or to fears, to self-interest or wider service. This is, in itself, a moral choice. Indeed, Pope Benedict has said:

‘Development is impossible without upright men and women, without financiers and politicians whose consciences are finely attuned to the requirements of the common good.’ (C in V 71)

I would like to suggest that this applies to the media in a number of ways. Leadership in the media is, essentially, no different to leadership in other sectors. While each sector of enterprise has its own proper goal and ambitions – and its own ‘stakeholders’ – the pathway of true development asks of every sector that it considers not only those goals and ambitions but also the requirements of the common good. The finance industry is a vivid and pertinent example. The goals and ambitions of some financial institutions were surely set too narrowly, on a time-scale that was too short term, on a set of criteria that were too self-centred. The result was a dramatic and catastrophic undermining of the common good, out of which the suffering will far outweigh the profit and those who suffer will, as always, be the most vulnerable and needy.

Perhaps there is an analogy here for leaders in the media sector to ponder. There is a duty incumbent on the media to have an eye for the common good. This will be readily recognised. Indeed it is well served when actual and hidden abuses, such as the expenses crisis, are brought to light. But difficult judgment have also to be made as to when a line is crossed – or if not crossed then at least blurred – between exposing the failures of some, on the one hand, and denigrating everyone associated with the institution on the other. The media, I would suggest, have a role and a responsibility in sustaining trust where that is justified and in portraying generosity and the spirit of service, even when it is to be found in an institution which is at the same time under suspicion.

CIVIC SOCIETY

In our document, the bishops go a little further. Indeed, one of its main contentions is that we have to be realistic in our appreciation of what political change, political action, political leadership on its own can achieve in bringing about the kind of society which we want.

You will recall that in our document we started by drawing attention to the well of generosity that so often is seen in our society, especially in times of crisis. We spoke of the energy, compassion and generosity towards people facing hardship and misfortune that so often emerges when needed. Our challenge was that of making these qualities a more consistent part of our social fabric. We said:

‘The difficulty is to make the virtues we discover in these moments part of the normal life of our society. Many will say this is impossible. They will say it is naïve to think society can change when it has invested so much in the pursuit of individual self-interest, often prizing personal choice ahead of duty to others. This is not true. Change is possible. But it cannot be left to politicians alone to bring it about. It needs all of us.’

We continued:

‘Have we allowed ourselves to be seduced by the myth that social problems are for the government to deal with? Politics are important but there are always limits to what any government can achieve. No government can solve every problem, nor make us more generous or responsive to need. The growth of regulations, targets and league tables, which are tools designed to make public services accountable, are no substitute for actions done as a free gift because the needs of a neighbour have to be met.’

There was, in my view, a good example of the role of wider society in bringing about change in the remarkable meeting that took place in Westminster Methodist Hall yesterday afternoon. It was a Citizens UK gathering at which the three leaders all spoke. It showed what commitment, enthusiasm and vision exists in our wider communities and how these qualities can be harnessed and enhanced by good community organising. In my view this was the most interesting moment of the election and far better television than the three formal debates.

Here people from local communities engaged directly, but in a structured and productive way, with the leaders about key political issues. The leaders were energised and, I believe, saw new possibilities for patterns of cooperation with civic society. The churches and other faith traditions were present, bringing their vision and energy to the process, but not claiming the driving seats which, quite rightly, were taken by people from the community themselves.

This meeting, too, was about the restoration of trust for it demonstrated the capacity for virtuous action, not driven by a narrow self-interest but genuinely by a wider good and by a search for the common good in practice.

In all of this too, I would suggest, the media have a part to play.

The tone of public discourse is, to a large extent, set by the media. Is that tone one which, while quite rightly holding the powerful to account, also encourages further reflection. An audience surely benefits from an invitation to listen further, and to both sides, to reflect and consider. The media, in all its forms, could encourage a more reflective approach which contributes to an environment in which communism can flourish.

I have always understood the axiom that good news does not sell newspapers. I have never had any opportunity to test it. But I also suspect that a diet of unremitting bad news has its long-term effects. It wearies us, even as it might spice our lives with

initial entertainment. It corrodes our sense of the fundamental goodness of each other. It lowers our mutual esteem and breeds in us a cynicism and world-weariness that takes the edge of even the most generous and inspiring of actions.

If our project is that of building up the common good, and if the challenge is that of bringing to the fore the innate goodness of people in the service of each other, then what is the responsibility of the media in this regard?

The promotion of the generous offering of time, energy and possessions out of the spirit of good citizenship and genuine neighbourliness is needed if we are to have a society worth living in. Some speak of this as 'social capital'. It is surely the task of us all to find ways of building up this precious capital.

FINANCIAL CRISIS

All of this, I believe, is going to become even more important in the months and years ahead. The most sombre notes sounded during the last few weeks are those which spell out the extent to which these countries are in a financial crisis. It has been said that none of the political parties have been making plain the nature and extent of the time of austerity we are about to enter. Servicing the national debt – simply paying the interest - is, at present, costing us more than the entire education budget. And that is to say nothing of levels of personal and household debt. This cannot continue. It may be Greece now but we are being warned that our turn is coming.

In times of austerity – as some are old enough to remember – it is precisely the qualities of social capital that are most needed. Here, too, we will all have our part to play, but it will require setting a new limit on the pursuit of our own particular goals and criteria of success. There is going to be a greater good which we may have to pursue or perish.

The media have enormous power. This we have seen and an acknowledgment of this lies beneath all that I am saying. This is a power to be used with increasing responsibility and sensitivity to the real, underlying needs of society. Reigning in the instinctive desire of the industry for conflict, for scandal, for exposure may be a challenge that lies ahead. If it does so then there is, as I have said, a particular responsibility on those in leadership in that industry. And my belief must be that those of you whose lives and attitudes are formed by the Christian faith – and other faiths too – might have a particular role to play.

It could be that one aspect of that role will be to mediate more sensitively the part played by religious faith in a complex and varied society such as ours. Could I illustrate what I mean in this way.

THE ELECTION

The other day I was asked what my response will be to the election result on Friday morning. On reflection I said that, first of all, I would wish to signal unambiguously the Church's readiness to work with whoever is forming the Government. Then, secondly, I would stress the need for that Government to find ways of drawing all people into the common effort of facing the problems before us.

Now the first point is clear enough. Those who want a deeper theological reflection on the foundations, the rationale, for the central place of dialogue in the life of the Church please go to our recent teaching document 'Meeting God in Friend and Stranger.' (No reflection on the likely winners of the election intended!).

But the second point is equally fundamental. Our society is, I believe, going to have to get beyond the limits imposed by the old belief that self-interest is the only effective motivator. We are going to need each others' good will in full measure. And the point is this: properly understood, properly approached, religious belief is one of the most powerful ways in which good will is deepened and unlocked in the people of this country. It has a crucial part to play. And the media can help in that, not least by addressing carefully and critically the ignorance of the true character of religious belief in this country today. Such ignorance can lead people to think uncritically that religious faith and practice is a problem. The evidence suggests otherwise, that it has a positive role to play not least in building up a stronger sense of social solidarity. Good communications build community.

May I conclude with words of Pope Benedict, the quotation with which we closed 'Choosing the Common Good':

The complexity and gravity of the present economic situation rightly cause us concern, but we must adopt a realistic attitude as we take up with confidence and hope the new responsibilities to which we are called by the prospect of a world in need of profound cultural renewal, a world that needs to rediscover fundamental values on which to build a better future. The current crisis obliges us to replan our journey, to set ourselves new rules and to discover new forms of commitment, to build on positive experiences and to reject negative ones. The crisis thus becomes an opportunity for discernment, in which to shape a new vision for the future.'

In this we all have a part to play.

+Vincent Nichols
4 May 2010