

THE MASS-MEDIA AND THEOLOGY

ON THE 25th November 1963, two votes were taken at the Vatican Council on the two parts of the schema on the Means of Social Communication. There were 331 votes against the first part, and as many as 502 (i.e. about a fourth of the Fathers present) against the second part. This is a large enough number to justify our asking why.

Part of the answer according to Mgr. Bernard, President of the *Office Catholique du Cinéma* and Council Expert, is that 'some thought that the Decree did not develop the theological grounds of the doctrine of the Church on these matters quite adequately;' and he goes on to remark on this as follows: 'This is, without doubt, true up to a point. The Decree relates these modern inventions to the Creator, both as to origin and as to end, but then it does not go into much detail. It ought to be said, however, that there hardly exists a theology of the Mass-Media yet. This is certainly a pity, but it is not up to a Council, perhaps, to be in the avant-garde of research and investigation, but to inventory the data existent at a given moment and to pronounce itself, if need be, on the different tendencies which appear. Let us hope that the lacuna, so acutely felt by some of the Fathers, will be the point of departure for new studies on this subject.' (*Revue Internationale du Cinéma*, Dec. 63 - Jan. 64, p. 5).

My brief paper could not have the ambition to fill this lacuna because of the limitations of time besides those of the speaker. I shall only offer some remarks meant to expand and illustrate the points made by the distinguished expert from whom I have just quoted.

Mgr. Bernard begins by admitting that only the sketchiest attempt is made in the Decree at providing a theology of the Mass-Media. By 'a theology of the Mass-Media' is meant, of course, an answer to the question: Do the Mass-Media have a definite, recognizable place in the divine plan for humanity? Have the Mass-Media, as such, got a specific function in the history of salvation? Or rather (since Mgr. Bernard assumes that the answer is 'yes'): How do the Mass-Media enter, specifically, in the vision which the Bible unfolds to us of the meaning of human history from the Creation of all things by the Word of God and its disruption by the Fall of the First Adam to the restoration of humanity and the world to God in Christ? How are they specifically related to the mission of the Church as seen, for instance, by St. Paul in the Epistles of the Captivity,

the Church, that is, 'as the destiny of the world, immanent in the world, ... the Church as a permanent avant-garde, always one jump ahead of the world, drawing it towards maturity and fulfilment'? (H. McCabe, in *Work*, p. 215).

It is important to realize, in order to understand the sense of this question, that it is an ontological question. It is quite separate from, e.g. the moral classification of films by competent authority, as 'good' or 'bad'. Anything man does may, from this moral viewpoint, be connected with the drama of salvation; for instance, if I eat a cheesecake, this may be related to my salvation, for it may be a fast-day and to eat it at an inappropriate time may be sinful and scandalous; or, if I make the cheesecake my main meal of the day, eating it may be an act of asceticism. But it is not such considerations of moral implications, however important they may be, I take it that Mgr. Bernard has in mind when he speaks of a theology of the Mass-Media. He assumes that they have a theological importance because of what they are by nature, in themselves; they are of interest to the dogmatic, and as well as to the moral, theologian. In this they are like sex or work or prayer, rather, than like eating cheesecakes.

Now, in the second section of the Preamble to the Decree, in what is given as an answer to the question: Why is the Council treating this subject?, the motives given for the Church's particular interest are essentially two: (1) positively, the mass-media can serve as a means for the 'spreading of the Kingdom of God' and (2) negatively, their misuse can cause great moral harm. What follows shows that, by the 'Spreading of the Kingdom of God', what is referred to are such uses of the Mass-Media as televising religious services, catechetical broadcasts, instructive films, Catholic newspapers etc. But, from the point of view of a *theology* of the Mass-Media, it is not the fact that they can be put to these uses directly in the service of the Church that is important; but rather the fact that by their very *nature*, even if they are not being used for an explicitly religious purpose, the means of social communication can be considered to be means of 'Spreading the Kingdom of God'. It is why this is so that I intend to outline, as briefly as possible in what follows; and I think that what follows can be taken as giving a deeper (because 'dogmatic' and not merely moral) justification of what is stated in the first section of the preamble:

'Among the admirable technical discoveries of our time ... the Church welcomes and follows with particular care those which concern the spirit of man and which have opened up new ways of more easily communicating

knowledge, thought and doctrine of every kind. The most important of these inventions are those instruments which are capable, by their very nature, of affecting and influencing not only individuals but also groups as such, and the whole of society'.

The Means of Social Communication are of particular theological interest because they are an important factor in the process of what has come to be called the 'personalization' of man and this process is an important aspect of the History of Salvation. That is the thesis which I propose to sketch out in this paper.

By 'personalization' is meant here the process by which man's reflective capacity augments with the increasing 'socialization' of human life, taking 'socialization' in the sense in which it is used in *Mater et Magistra*, i.e. as 'the progressive intensification of social relationships through the differentiation of roles and activities in life and the juridical institutionalization of this'.

It is not necessary to swallow Teilhard de Chardin whole in order to accept his view that mankind does not develop only in the same way as infra-human biological phenomena, i.e. by expansion or multiplication of numbers, like a colony of bacteria; but also in a 'convergent way', i.e. by moving from an initial state of dispersion to a greater interdependence and co-ordination. This is an evident feature of human history and the process is at present proceeding at an immensely accelerated rhythm. Nor can one deny in the face of the evidence that this process is accompanied by a heightening of the individual's self-consciousness; i.e. that the individual becomes more acutely aware of his specific nature (more conscious of his 'self') and that he acquires greater possibilities of having his nature more adequately fulfilled, the richer his participation in the social life of the community becomes. By 'personalization' is meant the sharpening and deepening of my self-consciousness and reflective ability, not through my isolation, my retreating within myself, my cutting myself off from society, but, on the contrary, through my sharing more fully in its cultural life, through increasing participation in a creative co-existence with my fellow-men in full and equal membership of (to put it in christian terminology) the New Body of the Second Adam.

If the Mass-Media are, as is said in the Preamble to the Conciliar Decree, of particular interest to the Church, is it not because they are evidence, as well as instruments, of this process of 'personalization' in as much as they provide, at once, a means of self-expression of unprecedented effectiveness and a means of social communication on an equally unprecedented scale? The Mass-Media have rendered possible the crea-

tion of a unified spiritual horizon for all mankind. Because the Mass-Media are the agents of heightened human self-awareness, self-possession, self-expression and self-communication, functionally related as these are to an increasingly socialized existence and to the enlargement of the communitarian dimension of the individual's spiritual life, they can be said to assume theological significance inasmuch as they can be seen, when placed in the perspective of the history of salvation, to be means which by their specific nature, allow man to become a better image of God in His Trinitarian life.

This follows, clearly enough, from the fact that, as the Dogmatic Constitution 'De Ecclesia' stresses, by Divine will, the Redemption does not consist in the bringing of salvation to men individually, but in solidarity, through their communion in the one Mystical Body. Just as the Fall, by dividing man from God, divided Man within himself, divided men between themselves, the Redemption restores the possibility of communion with God through communion among men, in Christ. Love reorganizes what sin had isolated.

Now human love differs from animal love, and is capable of being supernaturalized precisely because of its intimate connection with knowledge; because it can be communicated. Spiritual union is possible among men precisely because of their knowledge of themselves and their ability to communicate their knowledge reciprocally.

This communication is never perfect among men as it is between the Father and the Son in the Holy Spirit; but man is an image of the Trinitarian God inasmuch as he has this capacity for selfcommunication; and the more this capacity is amplified, developed and increased, the closer the image comes to its source.

But the growth of this capacity is a function of the progress of personalization of which the means of social communication are especially effective instruments. Hence it will be readily seen how the Mass-Media, regarded as means of the social communication of self, permitting in the process the deeper fathoming of human nature in essentially social ways, can be regarded as apt by nature to contribute to the divine plan of restoring humanity to the Trinitarian life even when not used for specifically religious ends.

Contemporary theologians have placed the greatest emphasis on the fundamental contrast between the Judeo-Christian 'linear' vision of history (i.e. history as having a sense and an end) and the Greek-Oriental 'cyclical' conception of it. But it seems a pity that many who write on this topic do not stress the point on which the theologian who was per-

haps the first to emphasize the contrast, Laberthonniere, laid great stress viz. that the contrast between these two opposed conceptions of History is dependent on the contrast between the Judeo-Christian concepts of God and man as both 'personal' (the term being used analogically) and the absence of these concepts in Greek thought. It is because God is thought of as personal, that He can be thought of as intervening in and guiding history – unlike Plato's Idea of the Good or Aristotle's Pure Act who 'having nothing to become has nothing to do.' And it is because man is conceived as a person, i.e. not as a mere individual living an isolated life but as someone to whom communication with his fellows is connatural, that the drama of his spiritual history is possible. The doctrine of the Fall is only conceivable if Adam is seen as, in some way, already containing the whole of humanity; i.e. that each individual is a person, a part of an organically organized whole; and the same is true of the Redemption: the person of Christ contains the whole.

Moreover, we may note, that the structure of the Redemption is determined by the Trinitarian concept of God who engenders, in His own unity, a plurality of persons. As Laberthonniere said, the dualism conceived by the Greeks between God and the world is radically abolished, 'les êtres son reliés a lui et les uns aux autres, non par un rapport logique, mais par un rapport physique qui, pratiquement, devient un rapport moral'. (Le Realisme Chrétien et l'Idealisme Grec 1904, p. 71). The relationship between God and His creatures is founded on God's Omnipotence – which is itself exercised with freedom and love and demands a free and loving response. On the contrary, when the personal God is substituted by an abstract Ideal, instead of a dynamic relationship of love and freedom, a static necessity (*ananke*) will be affirmed as the only possible relationship between God and the cosmos.

If, therefore, on the one hand, it can easily be seen that any means which render social communication easier and closer are, by nature, means which by relating human beings more intimately with each other, *ipso facto* relate them more intimately with God, on the other hand, it can just as easily be seen that this will happen only on condition that these means be used according to their nature. The conditions of their moral use can be founded on a consideration of their intrinsic nature and not only according to the consequences which might flow from their good or bad use. The means of social communication will be seen to be inauthentically used not only when they are used in particular ways which are judged to have evil consequences (provocations to impurity or spreading of misinformation, etc.) but, in general, when they are not used as a

means which helps the personalization of man i.e. as a means which establishes inter-personal communication conceived as an invitation to a personalized response by the receiver to a personalized expression by the transmitter. It is to be assumed that the fact that the 'production side' of the means of social communication is essentially a task of collaboration, far from destroying 'personalization', on the contrary, allows it to be of even greater value from this point of view, because, as was said above, personalization is a function of the socialization of the individual and collaboration, when successful, helps its realization, rather than hindering it. But love and freedom of expression and response are essential conditions of personalized communication. The criteria for moral judgements can be derived from our ontological considerations.

I feel, however, that it should be emphasized that there are other ways of considering the cinema, radio, TV, the Press than as 'means of social communication', ways which might prove to be, perhaps, theologically even more interesting.

In order to explain why this term was chosen, Father Baragli, S.J. has written that 'better than any other, in fact, it indicates the precise and predominant aspect because of which this complex of facts interests the church; an aspect which can be considered as the point of arrival of a long conceptual development on a matter still fluid, and of a progressive growth of awareness which has only now become total'. Father Baragli then says that the various Secretariats established by the Holy See with competence in sectors of the field were after 'a common term which, while including them all, would designate the most relevant and total aspect – scholastically one would say: the formal reason – which interested Church and Council.'

He says that the terms *techniques de diffusion* and *mass-media* or *mass-communications* were avoided because the first 'imparted to *diffusion* the character of mechanical impersonality' while the second might give rise to the idea that, by nature, these means tended to produce the 'mass-man', i.e. to depersonalize the individual, which is precisely what the Church is concerned to say they should not do when properly used, in spite of what may have been historically taking place. (*Civiltà Cattolica*, 1963, Vol. I, p. 114-118).

This confirms the view outlined above that it is because of their *personalizing* potentiality that the 'Means of Social Communication' have a specific place in the History of Salvation. But I would not agree that the term 'Means of Social Communication' designates the 'total', or even the most 'relevant' aspect which is of interest to the Church in the Cinema,

Radio, T.V., although it would be difficult, (impossible perhaps), to find any blanket term to do this job. Indeed I would question whether there is a common 'formal reason' for all the 'means of social communications' being of interest to the Church, i.e., whether there is this job for a word to do.

It may well be (I think it is) that it is not a common essence which they have in common, but rather a 'family relationship' – not one element in common which defines them, but a system of interconnexions which relates them to each other and makes of them a 'family'. At a certain point, the Decree of the Council itself mentions 'the particular nature of each instrument', and perhaps it would be more fruitful to approach them separately in order to see whether each of them has not a theological significance in itself, which need not be shared by another, and then to see what relationships existed between the different media.

For instance, Prof. Appollonio has tried to distinguish between the cinema and television by characterizing the former as 'narrative by means of images' and the latter as 'communication by means of images'. The late Father Ayffre has attempted to determine the ways in which the cinema can serve as a *locus revelationis* or as a 'theophanic' medium. I have published a long and detailed criticism of Ayffre's thesis in which I tried to show why his proposed distinction between two ways – the 'liturgical' and the 'phenomenological' – in which the cinema could act as a manifestor of God in the creation, doesn't work: neither of the characterizations he gives of the 'liturgical' and the 'phenomenological' styles do justice to the films he quotes as examples of them; but, I suggest, that the films which he justly identifies as 'theophanic' are better characterized as stylized visions of a world in the process of transfiguration.

But, whatever the interest of this particular debate, I think that the cinema might well be judged to have a more specific relevance, in itself, to the Church than is indicated when it is merely treated as a 'means of social communication.' If one looked at it from another point of view, let us say as an 'art-form', it might be discovered to have a religious significance, in addition to that which it has as a possibly 'personalizing' factor. In order to show this, however, it would be necessary to go deep into the theology of art – a task which falls quite outside the scope of this brief paper.

It is, however, a task which I strongly feel should be attempted. I expect it to be more fruitful, as an approach, to study, say, the cinema in itself, and then in relation to T.V., before attempting to generalize. I expect more development to come out of a consideration of the cinema as

an art-form than as a means of social communication. Considered as the latter, I think the essence of the matter has been said from the theological point of view. But I think that questions such as: how is the religious cinema related to religious painting, – making use of the distinction (if there is one) between religious and liturgical painting, and others on those lines, might well yield considerations of not a little theological interest.

P. SERRACINO INGLOTT