

**MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER
BENEDICT XVI
42nd WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY**

Sunday, 4 May 2008

***The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service.
Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others.***

Dear Brothers and Sisters!

1. The theme of this year's World Communications Day – "*The Media: At the Crossroads between Self-Promotion and Service. Searching for the Truth in order to Share it with Others*" – sheds light on the important role of the media in the life of individuals and society. Truly, there is no area of human experience, especially given the vast phenomenon of globalization, in which the media have not become an integral part of interpersonal relations and of social, economic, political and religious development. As I said in my [Message for this year's World Day of Peace](#) (1 January 2008): "The social communications media, in particular, because of their educational potential, have a special responsibility for promoting respect for the family, making clear its expectations and rights, and presenting all its beauty" (No. 5).

2. In view of their meteoric technological evolution, the media have acquired extraordinary potential, while raising new and hitherto unimaginable questions and problems. There is no denying the contribution they can make to the diffusion of news, to knowledge of facts and to the dissemination of information: they have played a decisive part, for example, in the spread of literacy and in socialization, as well as the development of democracy and dialogue among peoples. Without their contribution it would truly be difficult to foster and strengthen understanding between nations, to breathe life into peace dialogues around the globe, to guarantee the primary good of access to information, while at the same time ensuring the free circulation of ideas, especially those promoting the ideals of solidarity and social justice. Indeed, the media, taken overall, are not only vehicles for spreading ideas: they can and should also be instruments at the service of a world of greater justice and solidarity. Unfortunately, though, they risk being transformed into systems aimed at subjecting humanity to agendas dictated by the dominant interests of the day. This is what happens when communication is used for ideological purposes or for the aggressive advertising of consumer products. While claiming to represent reality, it can tend to legitimize or impose distorted models of personal, family or social life. Moreover, in order to attract listeners and increase the size of audiences, it does not hesitate at times to have recourse to vulgarity and violence, and to overstep the mark. The media can also present and support models of development which serve to increase rather than reduce the technological divide between rich and poor countries.

3. Humanity today is at a crossroads. One could properly apply to the media what I wrote in the Encyclical [Spe Salvi](#) concerning the ambiguity of progress, which offers new possibilities for good, but at the same time opens up appalling possibilities for evil that formerly did not exist (cf. No. 22). We must ask, therefore, whether it is wise to allow the instruments of social communication to be exploited for indiscriminate "self-promotion" or to end up in the hands of those who use them to manipulate consciences. Should it not be a priority to ensure that they remain at the service of the person and of the common

good, and that they foster “man’s ethical formation ... man’s inner growth” (*ibid.*)? Their extraordinary impact on the lives of individuals and on society is widely acknowledged, yet today it is necessary to stress the radical shift, one might even say the complete change of role, that they are currently undergoing. Today, communication seems increasingly to claim not simply to represent reality, but to determine it, owing to the power and the force of suggestion that it possesses. It is clear, for example, that in certain situations the media are used not for the proper purpose of disseminating information, but to “create” events. This dangerous change in function has been noted with concern by many Church leaders. Precisely because we are dealing with realities that have a profound effect on all those dimensions of human life (moral, intellectual, religious, relational, affective, cultural) in which the good of the person is at stake, we must stress that not everything that is technically possible is also ethically permissible. Hence, the impact of the communications media on modern life raises unavoidable questions, which require choices and solutions that can no longer be deferred.

4. The role that the means of social communication have acquired in society must now be considered an integral part of the “anthropological” question that is emerging as the key challenge of the third millennium. Just as we see happening in areas such as human life, marriage and the family, and in the great contemporary issues of peace, justice and protection of creation, so too in the sector of social communications there are essential dimensions of the human person and the truth concerning the human person coming into play. When communication loses its ethical underpinning and eludes society’s control, it ends up no longer taking into account the centrality and inviolable dignity of the human person. As a result it risks exercising a negative influence on people’s consciences and choices and definitively conditioning their freedom and their very lives. For this reason it is essential that social communications should assiduously defend the person and fully respect human dignity. Many people now think there is a need, in this sphere, for “info-ethics”, just as we have bioethics in the field of medicine and in scientific research linked to life.

5. The media must avoid becoming spokesmen for economic materialism and ethical relativism, true scourges of our time. Instead, they can and must contribute to making known the truth about humanity, and defending it against those who tend to deny or destroy it. One might even say that seeking and presenting the truth about humanity constitutes the highest vocation of social communication. Utilizing for this purpose the many refined and engaging techniques that the media have at their disposal is an exciting task, entrusted in the first place to managers and operators in the sector. Yet it is a task which to some degree concerns us all, because we are all consumers and operators of social communications in this era of globalization. The new media – telecommunications and internet in particular – are changing the very face of communication; perhaps this is a valuable opportunity to reshape it, to make more visible, as my venerable predecessor Pope John Paul II said, the essential and indispensable elements of the truth about the human person (cf. Apostolic Letter *The Rapid Development*, 10).

6. Man thirsts for truth, he seeks truth; this fact is illustrated by the attention and the success achieved by so many publications, programmes or quality fiction in which the truth, beauty and greatness of the person, including the religious dimension of the person, are acknowledged and favourably presented. Jesus said: “You will know the truth and the truth will make you free” (*Jn* 8:32). The truth which makes us free is Christ, because only he can respond fully to the thirst for life and love that is present in the human heart. Those who have encountered him and have enthusiastically welcomed his message experience the irrepressible desire to share and communicate this truth. As Saint John writes, “That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we have looked upon and touched with our hands, concerning the word of life ... we proclaim also to you, so that you may have fellowship

with us. And our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. And we are writing this that our joy may be complete” (1 Jn 1:1-3).

Let us ask the Holy Spirit to raise up courageous communicators and authentic witnesses to the truth, faithful to Christ’s mandate and enthusiastic for the message of the faith, communicators who will “interpret modern cultural needs, committing themselves to approaching the communications age not as a time of alienation and confusion, but as a valuable time for the quest for the truth and for developing communion between persons and peoples” (John Paul II, *Address to the Conference for those working in Communications and Culture*, 9 November 2002).

With these wishes, I cordially impart my Blessing to all.

From the Vatican, 24 January 2008, Feast of Saint Francis de Sales.

BENEDICTUS XVI