

**Bernard Margueritte**

**The Media in a World in Crisis-**  
**Part of the Problem or Part of the**  
**Solution?**

We are all, in Europe, in the United States, in the world, experiencing a profound crisis. This is by no means a financial or even economic crisis only. It is a much more fundamental crisis, a crisis of values, indeed a crisis of civilization. We can and should try to improve this or that, but the odds are we will not make significant progress as long as we will live in a sick civilization, experiencing a spleen not “fin de siècle” but “début de siècle”.

If we don't know where to go, if we have lost vision, enthusiasm, dynamism, if for example Europe- once home of humanism- is drifting away in a values-less world, we, people in the media, have to take for it a huge responsibility. Time has come for us to make a serious act of contrition, if we want to find the ways for a renewal. Indeed we have stopped long ago to enlighten and serve the citizen, what used to be our fundamental mission.

We need, time and again, to have a clear consciousness of the problems we are encountering and we need to make the owners of the media, the decision-makers and the public at large aware of the situation of the media. But the most important is that we have to do that because everyone must be aware that without honest media, dedicated to serve the public, conscious of their mission, there is simply no hope for the future of our civilization and for the world.

This is the crucial point, the core of the matter. Media matters. We have to understand and explain that from what the media will be depends the future of our world. Nothing less.

We discussed this last year at a conference at the Cathedral of Canterbury, under the leadership of Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury- and an admirable man. I had the opportunity to quote there the Holy Pope John Paul II. He noted in his "Letter to Families" in 1994 that what is needed is a critical reflection about our society and added: *"this kind of critical reflection should lead our society, which certainly contains many positive aspects on the material and cultural level, to realize that, from various points of view, it is a society which is sick and is creating profound distortions in man. Why is this happening?... Is it an exaggeration to say that the mass media, if they are not guided by sound ethical principles, fail to serve the truth in its fundamental dimension? This is the real drama: the modern means of social communication are tempted to manipulate the message, thereby falsifying the truth about man. Human beings are not the same thing as the images proposed in advertising and shown by the modern mass media."*

### **A forgotten mission**

John Paul II did warn us many times. The media are not any more promoting, they are - for quite some time now - degrading the human person. Let us quote again his "Letter to Families": *"our society has broken away from the full truth about man, from the truth about what man and woman really are as persons... Is it an exaggeration to say that **the mass media, if they are not guided by sound ethical principles, fail to serve the truth in its fundamental dimension?** This is the real drama: the modern means of social communication are tempted to manipulate the message, thereby falsifying the truth about man."* No wonder that John Paul II during his June 1991 visit to Poland had to raise very sad

questions, *“Haven’t the principles of freedom been uprooted from our land by the Evil hiding under different covers? Haven’t they been pecked out by a variety of **birds of propaganda, publications and programs** which play with our human weakness?”* (in Łomża) and the pope warned again asking in Włocławek: *“do not let us become embroiled in this whole civilization of lust and abuse that grows unrestrainedly among us, **taking advantage of the various means of communication and of seductive perversion...** Is this civilization or anti-civilization? Culture or rather anti-culture? We ought to go back to basic notions: culture can only be what makes the human being more human and not what simply ‘consumes’ his humanity”*. The media, said the pope in another Polish city (Olsztyn): *“should defend freedom, but also the respect for the dignity of the person”*.

Unfortunately we are not close to this goal and the consequences are far-reaching, more than we often realize. Indeed everyone recognizes that the media have become and are a factor of dehumanization. In the crisis we are facing, they are thus undoubtedly part of the problem, part of the global world crisis.

What was our mission supposed to be and why the fact that we have forgotten this mission does have such a tremendous impact in the world’s situation?

We are not fighting merely for better media for the sake of the media. We are fighting for a better civilisation. For a better world! In fact, more and more media people realise that we have to change. But, as John Paul II said, *“the positive development of the media at the service of the common good is a responsibility of each and every one”*<sup>1</sup> Media, the first Areopagus of modern times, as said the Polish pope, are but a part of a broader picture. Our fight to restore the dignity of the media, to have media fulfilling their mission, serving the people, being a pillar of democracy and mutual

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<sup>1</sup> Apostolic Letter, “The Rapid Development”, 2005

understanding, is only a part- and it was certainly seen as such by John Paul II- of a global fight to build the civilisation of love, to move from the civilization of materialism, hedonism, consumerism, hatred and violence to the civilization of respect for the human person.

We are facing now a time of great crisis that may work like a catharsis that may paradoxically give us a great opportunity for change. Pope Benedict XVI said during a general audience that we, the faithful, want *“to see the end of this unjust world”* and added: *„ of course we don't want to witness now the end of the world. On the other hand however we do want the end of this unjust world. We too, want this world to change profoundly, a civilisation of love to unfold, and a world of justice, peace, free from violence and hunger to come.”*<sup>2</sup>

As wrote John Paul II: *“Who can deny that our age is one marked by a great crisis, which appears above all as a profound “crisis of truth”? A crisis of truth means, in the first place, a crisis of concepts. Do the words “love”, “freedom”, “sincere gift”, and even “person” and “rights of the person”, really convey their essential meaning?... This kind of critical reflection should lead our society, which certainly contains many positive aspects on the material and cultural level, to realize that, from various points of view, it is a society which is sick and is creating profound distortions in man. Why is this happening? The reason is that our society has broken away from the full truth about man, from the truth about what man and woman really are as persons.”*<sup>3</sup>

Let me quote again John Paul in the same Letter: *“Why is the “splendor of truth” so important? First of all, by way of contrast: the development of contemporary civilization is linked to a scientific*

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2 November 12, 2008

3 “Letter to the Families” (1994)

*and technological progress which is often achieved in a one-sided way, and thus appears purely positivistic. Positivism, as we know, results in agnosticism in theory and utilitarianism in practice and in ethics. In our own day, history is in a way repeating itself. Utilitarianism is a civilization of production and of use, a civilization of "things" and not of "persons", a civilization in which persons are used in the same way as things are used."*

And unfortunately the media have a huge responsibility in this crisis. *"This is precisely, wrote John Paul, why the Church is so concerned with the direction taken by the means of social communication, which have the duty of forming as well as informing their vast audience. Knowing the vast and powerful impact of the media, she never tires of reminding communications workers of the dangers arising from the manipulation of truth. Indeed, what truth can there be in films, shows and radio and television programs dominated by pornography and violence? Do these really serve the truth about man?... Is it an exaggeration to say that the mass media, if they are not guided by sound ethical principles, fail to serve the truth in its fundamental dimension? This is the real drama: the modern means of social communication are tempted to manipulate the message, thereby falsifying the truth about man. Human beings are not the same thing as the images proposed in advertising and shown by the modern mass media. They are much more "*

The deep, profound mission of the media was indeed supposed to be something else.

I was lucky to start my work as a journalist at 27, fresh out of university, under the leadership of Beuve-Méry, the founder and director of "Le Monde". He was an exceptional media man, arguably the greatest of the XX century in Europe. He taught me everything I needed to know about my job as a journalist and everything I consider up to this day as relevant in our vision of the media. He

was linked with the personalist Catholic movement, illustrated among others by Emmanuel Mounier. Therefore no wonder that for him the media- albeit with the necessity to be profitable- were not a mere business. *“Never forget, he kept saying, we are there as human beings and citizens addressing other human beings and citizens. This is a blessing. We ought to be up to it”*. For Beuve, entering the media was therefore comparable to entering the Church. It was an ordeal. Indeed, we had to pay for this privilege, or more precisely not be paid, since for the first three years the director of “Le Monde” made sure that we got extremely low wages, just to show that we are here out of a sense of devotion.

I have never forgotten, what Beuve told the young man entering the paper: *“I don’t ask you to be objective; this is a dull notion and, besides, there is no such thing as ‘objectivity’. So be passionate on the job; but I want from you more than objectivity, I want ‘honesty’, intellectual honesty”*. Obviously this is much more demanding.

For my old master the fundamental role of the media was twofold: *“**first**, to inform correctly and thoroughly your reader, listener, viewer about what is happening in his community, in his city, in his country, in the world, in such a way that he/she will be able to make up his/her own mind. Then he/she will be fully a citizen and therefore, my friend, we will live in a **democracy**. **Secondly**, your role is to inform the audience in your own country about the way-of-life, the culture, the problems, the dreams, the religion of **‘the Other’**, of far away people, so that they can understand and, hopefully, respect them”*.

He called me once to his office after one of my very first articles (he never did that, except to approve the unsigned editorial of the paper). He was not happy. He thought I presented there too much of my own views and he told me with great passion: *“you want to know what journalism is? It is very simple. Something is*

*happening, you go there and you report using what the Americans call the five "w" (where, who, what, when, why). But this is not enough! You have to present the historical, political, sociological, economic, etc. sources of what happened; Then you have to tell your reader what Mr. X or Y or the party A or B suggest to do about it. And so, my friend, your reader will have all he needs- and not only all he wants!- to understand the matter, to think about it and to make up his own mind."* And he concluded: "*then, my friend, he will be **a citizen** and we will live in a true **democracy!***"

Therefore the role of the media is **to move from information to inter-formation, from understanding to mutual understanding**. We are a pillar of democracy and we are aiming at building a new covenant in the world. We should never forget that **in "communications" there is "communion"**. For Beuve-Méry the role of the media was extremely noble precisely because he was humble: we were not there to "educate" the public or to change the world, albeit indirectly contributing to both. We were there to be the voice of the voiceless, to empower people, to allow them to understand what is going on, not by expressing our own opinions but by giving them all the needed background and presenting a variety of views voiced by those who were supposed to be well-informed. We were there to serve our audience, to allow those, who were reading us or listening to us to make up their own mind - in other words, to allow them to be truly citizens. Indeed **there is no living democracy without honest media**.

Moreover, **there cannot be peace in the world without honest media**. That was for him the second part of the equation. Prophetically, he repeated: "*if we don't allow our audience to know and respect the 'Other' (and that was the work of foreign correspondents), we will have a world not of understanding and peace, but of hatred and violence"*. As a matter of fact, 50 years

later is there anything that is missing from this vision of the media? Maybe simply the willingness to put it in practice.

The Polish Pope added for me another dimension to the teachings of Beuve-Méry, not merely by welcoming me on May 25, 1999 in the Vatican, giving His blessing to my work but by His spiritual, but also very practical vision of the media.

John Paul II was fascinated by the media. No Pope, nor even many experts in journalism, have written so extensively about the media. His Holiness did it more often than every year on the occasion of the World Communications Day. But, beyond that, John Paul was himself the greatest “communicator”- much more, one can say, than even Ronald Reagan. Albeit John Paul II himself wrote that *“through the history of salvation, Christ presents himself to us as the “communicator” of the Father... The eternal Word made flesh, in communicating Himself, always shows respect for those who listen, teaches understanding of their situation and needs, is moved to compassion for their suffering and to a resolute determination to say to them only what they need to hear without imposition or compromise, deceit or manipulation”*<sup>4</sup> And the Gospel itself is news, it is the *eu-angelion*, the good news. And one can say that the apostles were the best foreign correspondents of all times. In fact Pope Paul VI wrote that Saint Paul, whose Letters to the Corinthians are a brilliant media job, would probably be a journalist, if he was around today!<sup>5</sup>

The great power of the media, for good or ill, was certainly recognized by John Paul II. And it is a particular responsibility for us, Christians, to use this power properly. Indeed our duty is to show our faith in action, in dealings. *“This is the great task for our generation, for all Christians of our day: to bring the light of Christ*

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4 Apostolic Letter to those responsible for communications “the Rapid Development” (24/01/2005)

5 Paul VI, speech to the International Union of the Catholic Press (1/12/1963)

*into daily life. To bring it into the "modern areopagi", into the vast territories of contemporary civilization and culture, of politics and economics. Faith cannot be lived only in the depths of the human soul",* underlined John Paul II.<sup>6</sup> And as a matter of fact, *"the first Areopagus of modern times is the world of communications... The communications media have acquired such importance as to be the principal means of guidance and inspiration for many people in their personal, familial, and social behavior".*<sup>7</sup> Indeed the role of the media is permanently growing: *"The constant development of the means of social communication has a growing influence on people and public opinion and this increases the responsibility of those who are directly involved in the sector, because it induces them to make inspired choices in the search for truth and in serving the common good."*<sup>8</sup>

### **A series of failures**

Indeed the consequences of our failings have a tremendous impact on the world. How do we see that we are part of the problems of our civilization?

First, we have to recognize that **the fight for the freedom of the press** is never ended. We know that in many parts of the world there is no such freedom up to these days, in Africa, in China, in Russia, just to mention a few examples. The political power always had the tendency to control the media. I remember how I was astonished to hear Lech Wałęsa, the great leader of Solidarność, telling me as soon as he became president: *"you know, our priority now is to control the TV as soon as possible!"* And that was said by a man, who fought all his life for the freedom of the press. Nowadays the political leadership in the Poland of Solidarity

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6 JP II, speech in Legnica, Poland (2/06/1997)

7 Apostolic Letter "the Rapid Development"

8 Message to the Catholic Union of the Italian Press, 1999

control indeed 80% of the media. In the Arabic world the situation is no better. Al Jazeera for one is remarkably professional on the job, but many studies have shown how its objectivity ends where the political interests of the Qataris start. John Kerry reported, when he was just a senator, about many negotiations with the Qatari leaders offering a more friendly coverage of American affairs by Al Jazeera against political support from Washington...

Obviously many leaders in the world are still convinced that if they can control the minds of the people they will be able to run their country without difficulty. They pretend to promote democracy, but what they truly dream of, is a democracy without citizens! Obviously they did not learn the lessons of the past, which showed that where you don't have informed and conscious citizens, the rulers themselves are down the road paying the price. Not only because the citizens at one time or another have no other issue than to revolt, but also because they are themselves desinformed by the lack of open media, and therefore unable to properly run their country. We have seen that to a great extent in the collapse of communism.

To be honest though sometimes we have a reverse situation and media moguls are trying to control the politicians. The UK, with Mr. Murdoch, knows a lot about that. It was interesting for example to learn how Rebekah Brooks used her personal relations to tell Tony Blair about all the bad things Gordon Brown said supposedly about him and to tell Gordon Brown about all the bad things Tony Blair told her about him. It was an easy way to accelerate the fall of the Labor party. In any event every collusion between the media and the political forces is always detrimental for both.

So we have still to fight to bring about a true freedom of the press. Nevertheless my conviction is that we ought to primarily

focus our attention on another huge question: when we enjoy the freedom of the press, what do we do with it?

I had the opportunity to reflect more deeply on these matters when I was a fellow at the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard Kennedy School. First of all the founder and then director Marvin Kalb, one of the most prominent US journalists turned Harvard professor, was and is the embodiment of the best qualities Beuve-Méry would have loved to see in a media person. Marvin has strong convictions but they do not surface during any interview. Always polite, always trying to help his interlocutor better formulate his/her views, always hoping that a new light will shine that will serve the audience. Service and intellectual honesty, such important values for Beuve, are the trademarks of Marvin Kalb. It was a joy to learn from him.

But the stay at the Center was also painful in a way. I came there with all the due reverence a Frenchman should have for the country of the First Amendment. And I was shocked. Dan Rather, the once famous CBS anchor (now retired), expressed his dismay to see American TV, in spite of its enormous means, going from bad to worse and US journalists not being able to fulfil their mission. *“Our reputation, he said, has been reduced, our credibility cracked, justifiably; this has happened because too often for too long we have answered to the worst, not to the best within ourselves and within our audience”* and he added: *“we have allowed this great instrument, this resource, this weapon for the good to be squandered and cheapened... The best among us hang our heads in embarrassment, even shame”*.

Another celebrated anchor at that time, Ted Koppel, expressed similar concerns and saw in the decay of journalism *“the inevitable consequence of the marketplace bringing its economic forces to bear on journalism”*. R. W. Apple Jr., the Washington bureau chief of the *“New York Times”* stated that *“much of American journalistic*

*resources and energy is today devoted to unserious work” and he added that, as bad money drove out good money, so “bad journalism is driving out good journalism”, concluding that “we are increasingly in the hands of people who don’t share our values and who don’t think what we do is important”.*

According to all those remarkable journalists, we are now reduced to “infotainment” or even “showbizzification” of information. When the situation is perceived that way in the country of the First Amendment, what can we hope to have elsewhere?

Indeed our problems are numerous. I will here just mention a few. Let’s start with the role of **globalization and of money making**. Globalization has pushed toward the concentration and standardization of the media. As pope John Paul II said, “*globalization is neither good or bad; it will be what the people will do with it*”<sup>9</sup>. Unfortunately so far globalisation is not showing a too friendly human face. In “*Le Monde Diplomatique*”<sup>10</sup>, Ignacio Ramonet has shown how the industrial giants, from the utilities, electronic activities, telephone, water or armament sectors have jumped into the media world. America Online is controlling Netscape, Time, Warner Bros and CNN; Bill Gates is the king of software but also of the press photography through his agency Corbis; Rupert Murdoch owns a variety of British and American papers, like The Times, The Sun, The New York Post, a satellite network BskyB and also a major film production company, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox. Some in Europe are trying to follow the model. Bertelsmann owns a lot of papers, radio and TV channels; the same is true with Sergio Berlusconi in Italy. In France our two biggest groups are controlled by Serge Dassault and Jean-Luc Lagardère, both involved... in the armament industry!

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9 Address to the Academy of Social Sciences (Vatican, 26/04/2001)

10 “Médias concentrés”, Le Monde diplomatique (12/2002)

As writes Ramonet, *“all those concentrations are a danger for the pluralism of the press and for democracy. Moreover they put the emphasis on profits, instead of quality”*. The former president of *“Le Monde Diplomatique”* continues: *“one of the precious rights of the human being is the right to freely communicate one’s thoughts and opinions. In democratic societies, the freedom of speech is not only guaranteed, it goes together with another fundamental right: the right to be well informed. But this right is endangered by the concentration of the media, by the merging of once independent newspapers into hegemonic groups. Should the citizens accept this hijacking of the freedom of the press? Can they tolerate that information be reduced to a banal commodity?”*

Paul Krugman, who received the Nobel Prize for economy, expressed similar concerns in *The New York Times*. He said, almost jokingly, that in the United States you get almost all your news, day in and day out, from what he calls *“AOLTimeWarnerGeneralElectricDisneyWestinghouseNewsCorp”*. He adds: *“The handful of organisations that supply most people with their news have major commercial interests that inevitably tempt them to slant their coverage, and more generally to be deferential to the ruling party.”* He concludes: *“For the time being, blatant media bias is still limited by old rules and old norms of behaviour. But soon the rules will be abolished, and the norms are eroding before our eyes. Do the conflicts of interest of our highly concentrated media constitute a threat to democracy? I’ve reported; you decide”* (*“In media res”*, NYT 29/11/2002).

This globalised concentration of media is also bringing about a **dull uniformity of the media**. Here we are faced not only with a world-wide domination of American-made media where, for example, 70 per cent of all the film series presented on television screens in Europe come from Hollywood. Indeed, this “uniformisation” is taking place in the United States as well, with

media people in Colorado or South Carolina complaining – as I witnessed personally – that they are not able to address topics important for the local people, since they are channelling what is presented by their main company based in California or New York.

A very strange phenomenon is linked to this: we claim to live in an era of globalisation, yet we know less and less about each other! The superficiality of our media is such that the French knows very little about the American way of life and vice-versa, not to mention of course that the Muslim does not know much about the Jew and vice-versa. The consequences are grave: instead of building mutual knowledge, we are responsible for a world-wide **lack of mutual understanding**.

**The rule of consumerism**, greed and money-making is certainly another culprit. The deontology is gone. The goals are profits and ratings. If there is a feeling that sensationalism, pornography and violence are leading to those goals, let them be used! We can only see in all this what John Paul II called, in the same address to the Pontifical Academy of Social Sciences already quoted, *“the intrusive, even invasive character of the logic of the market”*. At the end of the day we have what was expressed openly and cynically by Patrick Le Lay, when he was the president of the French television TF1. Describing his company’s mission he said: *“The job of TF1 is to help Coca-Cola to sell its product. For the advertising message to get through, what we need is that the brain of the TV-watcher is available. The goal of our programs is to prepare this brain between two advertising spots. What we sell to Coca-Cola is availability of human brain-time”* (*“Les dirigeants face au changement”*, 2004).

I remember myself that at some point in my career the director of a big newspaper of which I was the correspondent for Eastern Europe asked me to indulge more in sensationalism: *“your analyses are fine*, he said; *you are probably right. But you are*

*taking it easy being in Warsaw. My task is different: I have to sale a product every morning. Today it's a newspaper, maybe tomorrow it will be soap; no difference".* I had a hard time trying to explain that the difference is huge and that, while the media are a business, they are not a business *as usual*, since we, journalists, as Beuve-Méry used to say, do have a particular responsibility as human beings and citizens .

Another cause of the media crisis is **the trivialisation of our agenda**. We are presenting on our screens or newspapers news that is irrelevant, sensationalist, superficial...and depressing, instead of addressing the topics truly important to society. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu noted (*"Sur la télévision"*, 2004) that TV news are more and more filled with topics that are both of little significance and sensationalist, in such a way that they are *"consuming time that could be used to present other matters"*. The author sees in it a conscious method to desinform the citizen: *"if we use so precious minutes to speak about what is irrelevant it is because what is irrelevant is considered as important, only because it allows us to hide what is indeed important"* and Bourdieu concludes: *"putting the emphasis on events of little significance, filling the limited time we have with nothing or almost nothing, we eliminate relevant topics that would be needed for the citizen to exercise his democratic rights"*. Sometimes, it seems that all this is done on purpose and that some people are dreaming of **a democracy without citizens**. If it is true, they'd better wake up and understand that this would lead us all to tragedy!

This money-making approach, this focusing on "ratings" leads us also towards the presentation of more and more violence and sex on our screens but also in tabloids. Instead of educating the people, we are becoming **a tool for depraving** our audience and particularly the young!

We do have as well the tendency to **overemphasize the bad news**. If it bleeds, it leads. Today's journalist is the opposite of the eu-angelos. Indeed, when we watch our TV news, we have 90-95% of bad, dramatic news, showing all the dark aspects of human behaviour. Violence, killings, suicides, corruption, mafia, you name it. However, as shows the success in France of an organisation called "SparkNews", there is among the public a desire, not for a rosy approach to the reality, but for a much more balanced presentation of the realities of our world, where- thank God!- we still have many people working to bring about the good. Indeed, as John Paul II reminds us, *"in a large strata of today's society there is a strong desire for good which is not always adequately acknowledged in newspapers and radio-television news bulletins, where the parameters for evaluating events are often marked by commercial rather than by social criteria. There is a tendency to favor "what hits the headlines", what is "sensational", instead of what would help people understand world events better. The danger is the distortion of the truth."*<sup>11</sup>

Another difficulty is paradoxically linked to technological progress. We can now report immediately from any part of the world. Ted Koppel, already mentioned, said that the fact that he is able to comment events live from anywhere is a *"technological tour de force"*, but at the same time he is conscious that his work is not as good as it was, since he has no time to prepare, to reflect and to edit his program. Similarly, we now have all the facts we could possibly want, but what for? We have everything on the internet and on hundreds of TV channels. We are flooded by news, everywhere and every minute. As we have fast-food, we are getting accustomed to **"fast-news"**.

Therefore we have the information, but we don't know **the meaning** of the news. As John Paul II wrote: *"This is certainly not an*

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<sup>11</sup> Message to the Catholic Union of the Italian Press, 1999

*easy mission in an age such as ours, in which there exists the conviction that the time of certainties is irretrievably past. Many people, in fact, believe that humanity must learn to live in a climate governed by an absence of meaning, by the provisional and by the fleeting.”<sup>12</sup>*

The Internet is obviously a fabulous tool, not only allowing us to get access to all possible news and topics, but also giving any citizen the possibility to get his/her message across. At the same time however, it is difficult to assess the credibility of the news and to know how reliable the source we are taking our news from is. John Paul II addressed this topic as well: *“The essence of the Internet in fact is that it provides an almost unending flood of information, much of which passes in a moment. In a culture which feeds on the ephemeral there can easily be a risk of believing that it is facts that matter, rather than values. The Internet offers extensive knowledge, but it does not teach values; and when values are disregarded, our very humanity is demeaned and man easily loses sight of his transcendent dignity. Despite its enormous potential for good, some of the degrading and damaging ways in which the Internet can be used are already obvious to all, and public authorities surely have a responsibility to guarantee that this marvelous instrument serves the common good and does not become a source of harm...Attention is riveted on what is tangible, useful, instantly available; the stimulus for deeper thought and reflection may be lacking... Understanding and wisdom are the fruit of a contemplative eye upon the world, and do not come from a mere accumulation of facts, no matter how interesting.”<sup>13</sup>*

Yet another reason for the decay of journalism is very simple: **the natural laziness of journalists**. To write a sensational piece attacking someone is easy: you sit at your computer and put it on

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12 Apostolic Letter, “The Rapid Development”, 2005

13 Message for the 36<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day, May 2002

the screen. On the other hand if you want to write about a serious matter, you have to do your homework, do intensive research and at the end, you need more skills to present this “serious” reporting in an attractive way. Laziness is pushing media people toward bad journalism. In fact it is my contention that **only professional journalism can be ethical and only ethical journalism can be professional.**

First, each of us working in the media, has to be convinced that he/she should better behave to serve honestly the people if he/she wants to realise him/herself as a human being. Secondly, we ought to reanimate the flame among our community, to rebuild the dignity and credibility of our trade. This is a person-to-person and conscience-to-conscience work. We need also to persuade the people that they have the final word and by choosing to buy the honest newspaper and not the tabloid, by watching the serious TV program and not the sensationalist one, they at the end of the day decide which media we will have tomorrow. Finally, we have to convince media owners that they can continue to indulge in the trivialization of the media agenda and they will be there five years from now, but they will lose their image and respectability and will be gone down the stretch. Furthermore, we will not have any living democracy in our countries nor peace in a world of mutual understanding. **By indulging in bad journalism today we are cutting the branch on which we are sitting!**

Where should we go therefore? There is only one way: to move from the pseudo-civilization of death, of consumerism, of hedonism to the civilization of life, the civilization of love, the civilization of respect for the dignity of the human person!

Indeed I may repeat: the call for honest media, at the service of the dignity of the people, is but a part of our call for the civilization of love. This is- following the teaching of Pope John Paul II- our task for the XXI century, it is the task of the new generation.

And this is the task of media people and, to begin with, of the young generation of journalists. A few years ago I made a tour of some of the best journalism schools in America, Columbia, NYU, Maryland, Missouri, Poynter Institute. After presenting my views about the mission of the media, I heard regularly from the remarkable professors there: *“you know, we believe that we are a great school, that our students will know everything they need to be good journalists, they will know **how** to be journalists; but maybe we forgot to tell them in the first place **why** they should be journalists”*.

Everyone ought to know what the mission of the media is and why it makes sense to work in it. The noble missions of journalism, so crucial to the world, are still there. The tools may have changed. We have the blessing of internet, fantastic new communication means, allowing everyone not only to get the news but to produce and share the news. Nevertheless the basic mission of journalism remains the same.

Can we revert to it? Curiously maybe I am extremely optimistic about it. First, precisely, because of the technological progress. The internet is a fantastic tool, but an ambivalent one. As we had “fast food” we now have “fast news”. Quite often those news are not verified and are presented and interpreted not by journalists we learned to know and respect for years but by people we don’t know. We realize that the news are not the media. That bringing the news is not being a journalist, that is to say somebody, who can put the news in perspective and context and explain the news to its readers and listeners. The people are now inundated by news, coming every second from everywhere, but they cannot understand what is happening. Therefore they starve, not for the news anymore but for the “meaning”, the “meaning” of the news. And so the need for quality media is greater than ever! The tabloids may be endangered but not in fact the quality media! Of course changes have to be made. There is no need anymore for the daily

paper to inform, except in the case of investigative journalism. The readers know already everything. Sometimes papers are only online daily (“The Christian Science Monitor” paved the way in this regard) but print a huge week-end magazine, read when people have more time to reflect and analyze. It is interesting to note that indeed the daily paper has a tendency to become a week-end paper, the weekly a monthly, the monthly a quarterly and the quarterly a book...

There is however another, maybe more fundamental reason for my optimism. This reason is the deep crisis of civilization we are in. As “*Le Monde*” wrote sometimes ago: “*Vive la crise!*” Indeed the crisis is so deep that it forces us to begin to think and to try to find new, bold solutions. What do we need to be able to find them: a well-informed, conscious citizenry on one part, and the cooperation of all the people in the world looking for the good, no matter what is their background, color of skin, religion, habits or whatever on the other hand. But you remember the lesson of Beuve-Méry: precisely only media, proper media, quality media can bring about a true citizenry, only media can allow people all around the world to know and respect each other and get ready to work together!

We therefore need the media, proper media, honest media dedicated to serve the citizen, to move out of the current crisis of civilization. At the same time if we want this drama to end the media have to listen to the Social Teaching of the Church, to build the “civilization of love”, a civilization based upon the respect of the dignity of the human person in all aspects.

### **Toward a Christian renewal of the media**

One of the most perverse behavior of the media is the propaganda of relativism, so rightfully denounced by Pope Benedict XVI. Nothing is white or black anymore and the natural laws are an illusion. The leaders and owners of the media are trying to present as “modernity” or “post-modernity” what is actually the picture of a

decadent world, maybe not « fin de siècle » but « début de siècle ». Instead of promoting the “civilization of love” they promote “the pseudo-civilization of death”. The killings of unborn babies, the marriages against the laws of nature, the endangering of family values, that’s what they want, that’s what is “modern” and progressive. In their frenetic propaganda campaign they go so far as to be ridiculous. Recently a big Polish paper launched a campaign demanding that, in the name of freedom of conscience, the children be allowed to choose by themselves their gender, but not before the age of 11...

All this is part of a global offensive to brain- streamed the people, to endanger true democracy and to let the unabashed power of the money rule everything. Indeed if they destroy the media and the family values the job will be done. What will then remain from our Christian values? One way to reach it is, for example, the devaluation of the words. The noble words- which alas have very often lost indeed much of their sense- are rejected. You cannot anymore write or speak about love, dignity, honor, patriotism, grace. What ridiculous words, they say! On the contrary our task, I believe, is to restore the values of those words and not to be shy to use them! Once again here John Paul II clearly saw the danger, showing that we are witnessing the fight between the civilization of love and, what he called “a counter-civilization” trying to destroy everything. And he showed how the media are involved in it, becoming a new “coercive force” (Olsztyn- June 1991).

Sometimes we may wonder: is it possible to be both a media man and a Christian anymore? Of course it is, the more so that we are witnessing the downing of this “counter-civilization” and that especially the young people are striving all around the world to restore the dignity of the person and the respect of the values. In December 2002 John Paul II wrote in his message to the Catholic International Union of the Press: “*We could ask ourselves what it*

*means to be a catholic professional journalist? It means simply to be an honest person, whose personal and professional life reflects the teachings of Jesus and of the Gospel. That means to seek the highest ideals of professionalism, to be a praying man or a woman always trying to give his/her best. That means to have the courage to search the truth and tell the truth, even when the truth is unpleasant or is not considered as "politically correct". That means to be sensitive to moral, religious and spiritual aspects of human life, which are too often badly understood or ignored on purpose. That means to expose not only the bad dealings and tragedies that are happening but also the positive and heartwarming activities, which are taking place for those in need: the poor, the ill, the handicapped and the weak people in a world that needs so badly those values."*

Is it so difficult for the media, but indeed for everyone since we are all in fact "media people", to revert to the Gospel? It is always good indeed to go back to the Readings. I suggest we try to reflect on three Readings, which are particularly relevant to the media. **The first one is the Gospel's call to bring "good news to the poor, liberty to captives, sight to the blind" (Lk. 4:18).** *Good news to the poor.* Yes, a necessary part of what the media should do is to fight for social justice. This is part of our Christian call for the respect of the dignity of the human person. *Liberty to captives.* One mission of the media should be to fight against all kind of oppression. Media and Freedom. They go together. Not only the freedom from tyranny, from authoritarianism, but also from the power of the State or the power of money. But more important than the "freedom from" is the "freedom to". The freedom to build together, inspired by our media, a new covenant. *Sight to the Blind.* Our mission in the media is indeed to give the people everything they need to understand what is happening around them. They should not be blind anymore to the world around us, but be able to make up their own mind.

The second Reading we can choose is the following: **“how beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news” (Is.52:7)**. But those are not numerous nowadays! 90% of the news on our televisions, as we have seen, are tragic or depressing news. There is for sure a lot of wrong-doings and dramas in our world, but we have also many positive initiatives and good people. We need to achieve in our media reporting a much better balance. We need to uplift the people, instead of permanently dragging them down.

A third Reading, particularly important for the media, is from **John (8:32) when Jesus says: “you will know the truth and the truth will set you free”**. There is no freedom if you don't know what is really happening around you, in your community, in your city, in your country and in the world. There is no freedom if you cannot reach out to the others, understand the cultures, the civilizations, the ways of life of far away people. Indeed this is a mission of the media to bring people together, to move from understanding to mutual understanding. Knowledge and truth indeed set you free. But if the media don't fulfill their mission in this regard, we will continue to live in a world where hatred is answering hatred, violence is answering violence. We cannot be Christians if we don't understand, respect, and love our brothers and sisters.

## **Conclusions**

We understand that we don't have a problem of the media; we have a problem of civilization. It is difficult for the media to be better than the world they are in! But they have to, if we want to have a chance to build the civilization of love.

For that matter what do we need to reach this goal? As we have seen, we need enlightened citizens, involved in the work for the common good, that is to say an authentic democracy in every

country. And we need as well, in our globalized world, the alliance of all people ready to work for the good, in all their diversity.

We will not achieve this without proper media. Happily though the basic, fundamental mission of the media has not changed. It is still there! We have only to recover our credibility and our dignity. There is no solution without us in the media! Without media as a pillar of democracy in every country and mutual understanding all over the world, there is no solution!

Since there is no way to build the civilization of love if the media will not find at last a new awareness of their own authentic mission, we realize how huge our responsibility is. We don't have any choice but to be part of the solution! We have to repeat again and again the lessons of Beuve-Méry: the missions of the media are to be, at the service of the citizen, the pillar of democracy but also to become a bridge-builder, informing about "the Other", and creating the conditions for the people of good-will worldwide to work together. Not only the media should be part of the effort to build a new society, but this effort will not have any chance of success if the media, will not be involved.

Then the media will not be anymore the problem. They will be the solution. We have to get better. We have to revert to our proper mission. Not only for our own sake but for the sake and future of our civilization and our world. With media fulfilling their role we will have a chance to overcome the current deep crisis of civilization we are in. Instead of being a huge part of our problem, the media will not only restore their own dignity, they will pave the way toward the civilization of love.