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Benedict XVI's Messages to the Mass Media

Abstract: Exploring the ethical implications of new modes of communication in the context of the theology of Benedict XVI and the official documents of the Catholic Church, this article offers insightful reflections on how digital technologies and modern media affect human dignity, authentic communication, and the dissemination of truth. During his pontificate, Benedict XVI paid particular attention to this theme, which is evident in his official documents and speeches. Benedict XVI brought a theological dimension to the debate on new media, emphasizing the connection between truth, love and authentic communication. His theology and the official documents of the Catholic Church remind us that technologies and new forms of communication are moral tools that must be used responsibly, with respect for human dignity and with the aim of spreading the truth and building a more just society.

Keywords: ethics, communication, media, theology, Benedict XVI

Introduction

Progress is only possible in a society where moral values and strong convictions exist.

Pope Benedict XVI

When the young Professor *Ratzinger* lectured to students at the University of Tübingen on Christianity, he had one basic intention. He wanted to be understood even by people who were not used to the language of the Church and who found that language disturbing. He perceived that to these people Christianity, thus packaged, was inaccessible. He chose the *Apostles' Creed*, also known as the "I Believe in God prayer," as the schema to follow. The incredible thoroughness and depth with which this wise man touched on the fundamental issues of Christianity is breathtaking. He showed in an admirable way how Christian truths are very closely connected to human life in its depths, which unfortunately the world deals with so little.¹

Joseph Ratzinger, Benedict XVI, was not only an outstanding theologian, but also an astute observer, diagnostician and prognosticator of his times. His thinking was far ahead of the curve, prophetically looking to the future and foreseeing the devastating consequences of human actions that are coming to fruition today, such as the rapidly increasing secularization and the related decline of youth in the Church. Both as a moderate modernist and as a convinced conservative, he foresaw the impending collapse or self-destruction of humanity living without God. The world, in his view, was on the brink. Therefore, in his countless speeches and writings, he repeatedly urged people to take care of the environment so that the earth, which the man received from the Creator, could be passed on to future generations.

On several occasions in his pastoral and academic work, he pointed out that both the world and the Church today are in deep crisis. Wars, disasters, famines, scandals, people focusing on themselves and an increasingly self-centred lifestyle, as if God did not exist, are leading the world to self-destruction.² With Pope Benedict XVI, an era came to an end. His years as Pope were like a great spiritual exercise for the Church, helping us to look uncompromisingly inwards and then to strengthen ourselves internally and externally. This humble and tireless champion of truth,

¹ Joseph Ratzinger, *Úvod do kresťanstva* (Trnava: Dobrá kniha, 2020), 45.

² Martyna Zaremba, „Welt auf der Kippe – Widerspiegelungen der Brüche des 20. und 21. Jahrhunderts in Peter Seewalds Biografie Benedikt XVI. Ein Leben“, *Teologia w Polsce* 18 (2024): 141–154.

who often astonished the world with his attitudes and decisions, perceived his position as a responsibility. He was one of the most brilliant personalities of the Catholic Church.³

Benedict XVI as a Communicator

Pope Benedict XVI was not only a brilliant theologian during his lifetime, but also a skilled communicator who used courage and creativity to engage the challenges of social media. He continued to communicate effectively in retirement through silence and prayer. Benedict XVI was also the first Pope to send text messages (to young people at the WYD in Sydney), hold a dialogue with astronauts on the International Space Station, answer questions on television on Good Friday (in 2011) and write an editorial in the *Financial Times* at Christmas 2012, focusing on the engagement of Christians in today's world.

Above all, Benedict XVI was the first Pope to face the invasion of the social media scene, which profoundly reshaped the global communication context in the years of his pontificate. Benedict also understood that the false distinction between the virtual and the real must be overcome because what is shared and interacted with on new platforms has clear consequences for people's daily lives. Benedict XVI encouraged Christians to be digital witnesses rather than influencers. He did it not just with words. On December 12, 2012, he became the first pope to send a tweet via the *@Pontifex* account opened a few days earlier. His decision was sometimes compared to the establishment of *Vatican Radio* by Pius XI.

Not everyone agreed with his action because people feared that the Pope would be exposed to criticism and insults, but Benedict XVI was convinced of his decision to move towards the New Evangelization. Once again, the Pope knew how to harness the potential of technological innovation to reach people who would otherwise remain excluded from the proclamation of the Gospel. Thus, in almost eight years of his pontificate, Benedict XVI communicated with creativity and courage, using the most diverse means of communication.

During his era, the rise of blogs as means of communication was well underway and went mainstream shortly before his election as a pope, and it was at this time that Catholic blogs began to take off in a big way. In addition, Facebook began expanding to universities a few months after Pope Benedict's election, and

³ Peter Seewald, *Benedict XVI. Posledné rozhovory* (Trnava: SSV, 2017).

the following year it was opened up to all. At the same time, Twitter took off into the world. These developments in the Internet use affected the lives of millions of people. Twitter made it possible for news and information to spread even faster, especially to journalists, bloggers and celebrities. Facebook found its way into the homes and lives of millions of people.⁴

The Main Characteristics of Benedict XVI as a Communicator

1. Theological depth and precision

- Benedict XVI had a talent for translating complex theological concepts into understandable language, which enabled him to reach not only theologians but also the wider public;
- His writings and speeches were always rigorously elaborated and rooted in biblical and patristic traditions;
- Despite his profound erudition, he was often perceived as a pope who emphasized the substance of faith and the simple truth of the Gospel;

2. Sense of truth in communication

- Benedict XVI stressed that communication should serve the truth and be based on respect for every person;
- In his messages, he often spoke of the need for truthfulness and authenticity, especially in the digital age where there is a risk of manipulation of information;

3. Digital and modern communication

- As a pope, he was aware of the importance of new media and technologies, seeing them not only as tools but also as a cultural space where the Church could be present;
- By joining Twitter, he showed openness to modern forms of communication;

4. Clarity and a calm tone

- His speeches and encyclicals were known for their calm tones and clear structures, allowing him to reach out to believers and non-believers alike;
- Although he was less charismatic than his predecessor John Paul II, his oratorical skills were based on intellectual authority and spiritual depth;

⁴ Timothy Finigan, "New Movements and New Media," *New Blackfriars* 94 (2013): 224.

5. Dialogue with culture

- Benedict XVI promoted the dialogue between faith and reason, which was made clear in his speeches, such as his famous address in Regensburg in 2006;
- Although the speech caused controversy, its aim was to highlight the importance of rationality and dialogue between religions and cultures;

6. Focus on content

- Benedict emphasized the content and meaning of communication more than its form. For him, communication was a tool for spreading the Gospel and the profound truths of our faith;

As the Pope wrote once, the means or tools of communication not only serve to exchange information, ideas and understanding between different groups in the society, but are also tainted by ambiguity. This danger, he said, was that the media tended to breed a monoculture that obscured creative genius, suppressed the subtlety of complex thought, and underestimated the specificity of cultural practices and the distinctiveness of religious beliefs. In his view, the media should be a resource that builds the *civilization of love* that all people desire. He went on to say that it could only be built if the media communicates only truth, information, ideas and facts openly in the light of proclaiming the truth. Thus, there would be no ambiguity between the statement and the fact, but it would be possible for the true word to form relationships filled with love, that is with God Himself, and the man would live in the midst of the Trinity.⁵

Benedict XVI's Theology Concerning Media and Communication

In his official documents and against the background of the theology of communication, Benedict XVI explored the ethical implications of new modes of communication. According to Benedict, the role that the media acquired in the society had to be understood as an essential part of the anthropological question that emerges as the key challenge of the third millennium. Throughout his academic career as a theologian, as well as during his papacy, Benedict XVI showed an interest in truth that was central to his thinking.

⁵ Michal Štverák, „Povolání médií v poselstvích Benedikta XVI. ke Světovému dni sdělovacích prostředků,” *Studia theologica* 1 (2023): 161.

With regard to communication, the Pope believed that the media should not become the voice of either economic materialism or ethical relativism. In this respect, he felt that the relationship between the journalistic search for truth and the pressures of power was a hot topic in contemporary journalism. Benedict XVI believed that the ultimate meaning of the media must be sought in an anthropological perspective. This means that the communication industry can produce a civilizing effect not only thanks to technological progress, but above all when it serves the truth and promotes the dignity of individuals and peoples, justice, fraternity, charity, literacy, socialization, democracy, dialogue, solidarity and the common good.

Digital networks are creating a new social and communication structure. In this respect, in the commitment to justice and charity in today's world, the phenomenon of mass media has rapidly reduced the distance between very different people and cultures, so that the needs of humanity are now much more immediately known. From the Pope's point of view, it was an advantage to help our neighbors in need. In this context, Benedict XVI noted that the media was a network that facilitated communication, communion and collaboration.

From the perspective of the theology of communication and as a consequence of God's self-communication and the man's capacity for communication, Benedict XVI stressed that new information technologies could become powerful instruments of unity and peace or, on the contrary, of destruction and division. This is because the media can facilitate the dissemination of true and false news, information and disinformation, formation and distortion, as well as humanization and dehumanization.

In his messages for World Communications Day, Benedict XVI insisted on the importance of dialogue so that the Internet could be used properly and communication could take on value and meaning, as well as the connection between silence and the word. Two aspects of communication that must be balanced, alternated and kept integrated with each other if authentic dialogue and deep closeness between people are to be achieved. In this sense, he talked about how silence brings listening, knowing, understanding, deepening, balance, gestures, bodily expression, and questions about the meaning of life. For this reason, Benedict XVI argued that it was necessary to create an appropriate environment, a kind of ecosystem that would maintain a fair balance between silence, words, images and sounds.⁶

⁶ Jesús Sánchez-Camacho, "Pope Benedict XVI's Approach to Media and Digital Culture in Catholic Social Thought," *Church, Communication and Culture* 2 (2022): 391.

Benedict XVI's Writings on the Media and the New Evangelization

At least five of his eight messages for World Communications Days are dedicated to this unprecedented digital Areopagus. Together they form a kind of overview by the *Teaching Office of the Church* of this new reality that has changed not only the way we communicate, but also the way we treat others. Benedict XVI immediately grasped the significance of the revolution in social media, which is not so much a means to use as an environment to inhabit. He, therefore, coined the term “digital continent” for social media and said that, like the geographic, the digital continent requires the commitment of the faithful — especially the laity, in accordance with *Inter Mirifica*, to evangelize this new mission territory.

During his pontificate, Pope Benedict delivered eight messages for World Communications Day. His texts reflect the digital transformation that the world came to know more and more rapidly in the previous two decades.⁷

Official messages for World Social Communications Day:

- Message for the 40th World CAP Day (2006) — Media — a network of communication, community and cooperation;
- Message for the 41st World CAP Day (2007) — Children and the means of communication: a challenge for education;
- Message for the 42nd World CAP Day (2008) — Means of social communication: at the crossroads between self-promotion and service. Seeking the truth with the intention of sharing it; (This one invites us to reflect on the role played by the media, and in particular on the increasing risk that they would become commonplace and no longer be instruments in the service of truth — something to be sought and shared);

⁷ Michal Štverák, „Povolání médií v poselstvích Benedikta XVI. ke Světovému dni sdělovacích prostředků,” *Studia theologica* 1 (2023): 165.

- Message for the 43rd World CAP Day (2009) — New technologies, new relationships. Promoting a culture of respect, dialogue, and friendship; (This message speaks of the power of technology to bring people together and is particularly relevant for young people because it touches upon the effects of new technology and defines new technologies as a true gift to humanity. The message also highlights the values that distinguish such environments, first and foremost the values of friendship and the networks of relationships that new technologies have not made possible);⁸
- Message for the 44th World CAP Day (2010) — The priest and the pastoral ministry of the digital world: new media at the service of the word;
- Message for the 45th World CAP Day (2011) — Truth, proclamation and authenticity of life in the digital age;
- Message for the 46th World Day of the CAP (2012) — “Silence and the Word: the way of evangelization”;
- Message for the 47th World Day of Social Media (2013) — Social networks: doors of truth and faith; new spaces for evangelization; (The Pope recognized the growing importance of social networks in people’s lives and the way they can create new relationships and communities. He noted that when used in a balanced way, social media can strengthen the bonds of unity between individuals and effectively promote the harmony of the human family. The Holy Father exhorted people to use social media in an inclusive and thoughtful way and try to avoid being overwhelmed by the loudest or most popular arguments on any topic. Pope Benedict saw social media as portals of truth and faith, and as new spaces for evangelization);⁹

Apostolic Exhortations:

- Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation “VERBUM” of the Holy Father Benedict XVI to the bishops, clergy, consecrated and lay faithful to the Word of God in the life and mission of the Church (30 September 2010);

⁸ Matthew Harrison, “Technology and Relationships Key to Pope’s Message for World Communications Day.” *Salt + Light Media*, accessed July 13, 2024, <https://slmedia.org/blog/technology-and-relationships-key-to-popes-message-for-world-communications-day>.

⁹ Benedict XVI, “Social Networks: Portals of Truth and Faith; New Spaces for Evangelization.” *Messages World Communications Days*, accessed Jun 19, 2014, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20130124_47th-world-communications-day.html.

Apostolic Letters:

- The Apostolic Letter “MOTU PROPRIO FIDES PER DOCTRINAM” is issued, *modifying* the Apostolic Constitution “PASTOR BONUS” and transferring the competence of catechesis from the Congregation for Clerics to the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization;¹⁰

The Ethical Challenges of New Media in the Light of Benedict's Theology

The term “communicate” occurs 43 times in the messages of Benedict XVI. In the messages analysed, Benedict XVI refers in particular to social media, whose main characteristic is the interpersonal communication of its users. This is why the themes discussed by the Pope implicitly include the transmission of faith understood as interpersonal communication mediated in culture. In his 2007 message on the influence of the media in shaping the cultural environment, Pope Benedict XVI wrote: “The complex challenges facing education today are often related to the growing influence of the media in our world. As one aspect of the phenomenon of globalization and a product of the rapid development of technology, they are shaping the cultural environment. Some have even argued that the formative influence of the media on education rivals that of the school, the Church, and perhaps even the family. For many people, reality is what the media deem to be real.”

Here the Pope referred to the content of the Apostolic Letter “Rapid Development,” in which John Paul II stresses the fact that from the very fact of the existence and influence of the media, a new culture is born. In the letter, John Paul II also recalled the text of his encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, where he referred to the media not only as instruments of evangelization, but also stressed the phenomenon of the new culture created by the world of media world in which the Gospel should be included.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, “Social Networks: Portals of Truth and Faith; New Spaces for Evangelization.”

This idea, taken from the teachings of John Paul II, Benedict XVI recalled the idea of cultural changes under the influence of media and the formation of a new media culture. In his 2011 message, he compared the socio-cultural changes that took place under the influence of the Industrial Revolution and the current broad cultural transformation under the influence of new communication technologies, saying that, “it is an increasingly widespread conviction that just as the Industrial Revolution, by introducing innovations into the production cycle and into the lives of workers, brought about profound changes in society, so too are the changes under way today in the field of communication, which are giving direction to major cultural and social changes.”¹¹

Hope in New Media and Their Positive Potential

According to Benedict XVI, the progress of the technological era brought many good things, which are also recognized by the Church. For example, the Internet — the rapid transmission of images and sound — opened up possibilities by which people, even at a great distance, can remain in almost daily contact, in a global connection. The Pope explained the popularity of the new technologies mainly because of their ability to satiate a basic human desire, which is to make contact. He said that when we feel the need to get closer to others, to know them better and to be known by them, we are responding to God’s call, a call that is part of our nature because we were created in the image and likeness of God, the God of communication and communion.

He recalled that the concept of friendship was revived in the vocabulary of digital social networks that emerged in the past. That is why a true friendship has always been considered one of the greatest riches a human being can possess. For this reason, he reminded that care must be taken not to devalue the concept and experience of friendship. It would be sad if our desire to forge and develop online friendships was to come at the cost of not having time for family, our fellow human beings and those we encounter in the everyday realities. Indeed, when the desire for

¹¹ Mirosław Chmielewski, “*Media Culture as a Challenge in Communicating the Faith as Presented in Benedict XVI’s Messages for the World Communications Days*,” *Biuletyn Edukacji Medialnej* 1 (2016): 156–178.

virtual relationships becomes an obsession, the result is that people become isolated and cut off from real social contact. This also ends up disrupting the patterns of rest, peace and reflection that are essential for healthy human development.

The task of reshaping the digital era is a challenge and a mission especially for the young. The Pope invited them to evangelize the digital continent to share the good news of God who became man, suffered, died and rose again to save humanity. Pope Benedict XVI called us to be proclaimers of the Truth. He argued that even those who work in the field of information production, media owners, publishers and journalists must feel obliged to have respect for human dignity and the value of a person, that is to offer words, images and information in a way that does not tarnish beauty, does not diminish respect for every person, does not denigrate and does not relativize the values of Truth and Love.¹²

Conclusion

The time of Benedict XVI was marked by the use of new media by the Catholic Church. It started with Catholic websites and moved on to blogging and tweeting. This is how the Church had to start communicating with younger people until newer digital systems replaced them. Most blogs were dominated by a conservative version of Catholicism, but this may have been what appealed to the young people who are still drawn to the Church. During his time as a theologian and as Archbishop of Munich and Freising, Benedict certainly could not avoid media interaction. The relationship between Benedict XVI and the media could be called tense and intense. The one who was the Logos Pope, known as the Pope of Reason and Word because of the depth and eloquence of his speeches and homilies, chose silence at the end of his life as the best way to underline everything he said.

Like Guardini, the German Pope believed that truth did not need special adornments to be felt. Truth speaks with its beauty. It is clear that Benedict XVI reached the hearts of his listeners on many occasions, for example, while still a cardinal, when he denounced the “filth” in the Church during the *Via Crucis*, a few days before the death of John Paul II, at the funeral of his predecessor and at the beginning of his own pontificate. He addressed a number of hot topics. They ranged from liturgy to liberation theology, from the very concept of the Church to the existence

¹² Tadeusz Zasepa, and Jarosław Wozniak, „Nové technológie a nové vzťahy v Digital Nation – podpora kultúry, úcty, dialógu a priateľstva,“ *Biuletyn Edukacji Medialnej* 1 (2009): 42–43.

of the devil. He also dealt with ecumenism and the Church's relations with other religions, as well as the centrality of the Eucharist and the role of bishops' conferences.

In order to better understand Benedict XVI's reflections on the media and social networks and on the necessary relationship between reason, word, silence and truth, we also draw on the reflections of the German Pope himself, not only in relation to news and social media, but also with regard to his own relationship between reason and word, silence and truth. In short, Benedict always defended the persuasive value of reason, the beauty of truth, and the need to alternate between words and silence. Benedict XVI's communication style had more in common with the rational than the emotional, with the word more than the gesture, with silence more than loud polemic.¹³

Pope Benedict XVI often explained what true being in the Church was — not the invention of an ideal Church, but the readiness to live and work in the very Church that is plagued by the powers of evil. The Holy Father developed this idea and expressed how, from his point of view, the Church changed along with the world and vice versa. This teaching corresponds to the experience that Benedict XVI left to the world because the union of the divine reality with human weakness has been a characteristic of the Catholic Church for centuries.¹⁴

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¹³ Pablo Blanco, "Words and Silence: the Relationship Between Benedict XVI and the Media," *Church, Communication and Culture* 3 (2018): 87.

¹⁴ Paweł Kasperowicz, „Benedykta XVI — wymyślanie Kościoła idealnego w kontekście synodalności Papieża Franciszka,” *Symposium* 2 (2022): 146.

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Gabriel Paľa, Michaela Šandalová

Messages de Benoît XVI aux moyens de communication sociale

Résumé

Explorant les implications éthiques des nouveaux modes de communication dans le contexte de la théologie de Benoît XVI et des documents officiels de l'Église catholique, cet article propose des réflexions pertinentes sur la manière dont les technologies numériques et les médias modernes affectent la dignité humaine, la communication authentique et la diffusion de la vérité. Au cours de son pontificat, Benoît XVI a accordé une attention particulière à ce thème, comme en témoignent ses documents officiels et ses discours. Benoît XVI a apporté une dimension théologique au débat sur les nouveaux médias, en soulignant le lien entre vérité, amour et communication authentique. Sa théologie et les documents officiels de l'Église catholique nous rappellent que les technologies et les nouvelles formes de communication sont des outils moraux qui doivent être utilisés de manière responsable, dans le respect de la dignité humaine et dans le but de diffuser la vérité et de construire une société plus juste.

Mots-clés : éthique, communication, médias, théologie, Benoît XVI

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Messaggi di Benedetto XVI ai mezzi di comunicazione sociale

Sommario

Esplorando le implicazioni etiche delle nuove modalità di comunicazione nel contesto della teologia di Benedetto XVI e dei documenti ufficiali della Chiesa cattolica, questo articolo offre riflessioni approfondite su come le tecnologie digitali e i media moderni influenzano la dignità umana, la comunicazione autentica e la diffusione della verità. Durante il suo pontificato, Benedetto XVI ha prestato particolare attenzione a questo tema, come dimostrano i suoi documenti ufficiali e i suoi discorsi. Benedetto XVI ha apportato una dimensione teologica al dibattito sui nuovi media, sottolineando il legame tra verità, amore e comunicazione autentica. La sua teologia e i documenti ufficiali della Chiesa cattolica ci ricordano che le tecnologie e le nuove forme di comunicazione sono strumenti morali che devono essere utilizzati in modo responsabile, nel rispetto della dignità umana e con l'obiettivo di diffondere la verità e costruire una società più giusta.

Parole chiave: etica, comunicazione, media, teologia, Benedetto XVI