

# The Responsibility of Christians in the Communications Media: Some Thoughts Based on St. Josemaría Escrivá's Teachings

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## “Technologies of the word” and the Good News

The history of communication technology goes back much further than we might at first think. Although not usually viewed in this light, even writing itself arose primarily as a means of communication, and is already, broadly speaking, a “technology.”

To speak of writing as the first “technology of communication” can, I think, help us evaluate calmly present-day media, including the most powerful and widespread ones such as film, radio, television, or the Internet. Communication technology has been of great importance for centuries now: for example, the cultural revolution brought about by printing, with its movable type and the possibility for the mass diffusion of books and newspapers.

For us Christians, for whom the communication of the “Good News” is a fundamental commitment, understanding how and by whom the “news” is spread today is a crucial task. It is not by chance that in an encyclical dedicated to the permanent missionary mandate of the Church, Pope John Paul II wrote: “The first Areopagus of the modern age is the world of communications, which is unifying humanity and turning it into what is known as a ‘global village.’ The media of social communication have become so important that for many they are the principal informative and formative instrument of orientation and inspiration for individual, family, and social behavior.”<sup>1</sup>

These two aspects of communication (formative and informative) are an ever-present theme in the teaching of St. Josemaría Escrivá. On the one hand, he stresses the responsibility Christians have to lead a life fully consistent with their Baptism, without dividing it into separate compartments. In addition, he reminds us of our apostolic commitment, the need to give witness and to

1. Blessed John Paul II, Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, no. 37.

“catechize” with all the means at our disposal: “it is our duty to give doctrine always, everywhere, and with all the means.”<sup>2</sup>

St. Josemaría set forth with great clarity the path for committed Christians in the world of the means of communication (a mission which, as we will see, is to a certain extent everyone’s task). He did so not only with his specific teachings related to what he called “the apostolate of public opinion,” but especially with his teaching on the Christian vocation, on the call to sanctity addressed to everyone, and on the importance of doing apostolate in all circumstances and with all available means. Very relevant here is his teaching on the awareness of divine filiation that should saturate the life of every Christian. The reality of being children of God in Christ, of being heirs of the Kingdom and sharers in Christ’s reign over creation, should lead Christians to reject any inferiority complex, to feel at home in every human environment, including those that seem to present the most problems or that (for various reasons, often due to historical circumstances) seem the most distanced from Christ.

In this essay, I will not try to comment in detail on St. Josemaría’s texts dealing with the “apostolate of public opinion” (a topic that would demand a substantially broader essay).<sup>3</sup> Rather I will attempt to put in context reflections about the influence of the mass media (especially television and cinema) in contemporary society, by viewing them in light of some constant themes in the preaching of the founder of Opus Dei on the responsibility Christians have to confront problems that arise in this area. Obviously, we will not try to explain St. Josemaría teachings on this topic exhaustively, nor is ours the only way of interpreting them. Additional important context is provided by texts from the Magisterium on the use of the means of communication.<sup>4</sup>

2. St. Josemaría, Letter of April 30, 1946, no. 43 (APG, P07 12, p.124).

3. Here one could mention, for example, the importance of repeating the same ideas with patience and constancy, changing the presentation and way of saying things, presenting ideas in an attractive way, but without fear of returning again and again to certain key concepts; as well as the different forms that “giving doctrine” can require in diverse contexts and media, etc.

4. The principle texts are: Vatican II, Decree *Inter Mirifica* (1964); Pontifical Commission for Social Communications, *Communio et Progressio* (1971); Pontifical Council for Social Communications, *Aetatis Novae* (1992); other more specific documents from the same Pontifical Council on various aspects of communications (Pornography and Violence; Ethics of Advertising; Ethics in the Internet, etc.); the messages of Paul VI, John Paul II, Benedict XVI for World Communications Day; Blessed John Paul II, Apostolic letter *The Rapid Development* (January 24, 2005).

In no. 37 of the encyclical *Redemptoris missio*, (December 7, 1990), John Paul II gives some very important guidelines for our efforts here: “To some degree perhaps, this Areopagus has been neglected. Generally, preference has been given to other means of preaching the Gospel and of Christian education, while the mass media are left to the initiative of individuals or small groups and enter into pastoral planning only in a secondary way. Involvement in the mass media, however, is not meant merely to strengthen the preaching of the Gospel. There is a deeper reality involved here: since the very evangelization of modern culture depends to a great extent on the influence of the media, it is not enough to use the media simply to spread the Christian message and the Church’s authentic teaching. It is also necessary to integrate that message into the ‘new culture’ created by modern communications.”

## Evolving technologies

We can begin by recalling that books, as well as ancient Roman manuscripts, are already in some sense a “technology of the word.” The changes that the introduction of writing led to in the way people communicate are very relevant and were the object of interesting studies on the part of twentieth century authors, including, for example, the Jesuit Walter J. Ong.<sup>5</sup> Centuries of a “civilization of the book” have familiarized us with this technology; everyone today accepts that books are written to spread a message, along with other forms of writing. It has never occurred to anyone to reproach St. Paul for having written letters, as though the Apostle had wanted to downplay personal relationships. (However Jesus, it is good to recall, did not write anything.)

Books—starting with Sacred Scripture itself—have been very important for evangelization throughout the Church’s history. The writings of St. Augustine, St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Teresa, St. John of the Cross, St. Alphonse Liguori, St. Theresa of the Child Jesus, etc., have been of immense benefit for the effective spread of the faith.

With regard to the more recent media (radio, television, the movies, Internet) perhaps it will require a century or two to incorporate them in a “natural” way into the life of Christians. It is possible that we are still in the first epoch, full of perplexity—an epoch in which some people believe too much in the power of the media while others overly distrust it. The result is often a pendulum-like movement between fear of these new means of communication and an over-idolization of them. Personally, my impression is that we are still in the first phase of a difficult process of assimilation, of “coming to grips with” and “taking the measure of” the new media.

Some sectors of the Protestant world (especially in America) make regular and effective (at least if one considers the human results) use of television . While in the Catholic world, after the initial example of Fulton J. Sheen (whose weekly radio and television programs had an audience of over 30 million people and continued for more than a decade<sup>6</sup>), a greater reluctance has been shown (possibly in part because the world of the so-called televangelists has not been immune from financial and other scandals). Nevertheless, interesting “grass-root” initiatives begun by Catholics have arisen, such as Radio Maria, with very high numbers of listeners. In Italy, Radio Maria averages over

5. See, for example, Walter J. Ong, *The Presence of the Word*, Yale University Press, New Haven: 1967; and by the same author, *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word*, Methuen, London – New York 1982.

6. Fulton J. Sheen, who was also for several years Bishop of Rochester, N.Y. and long-time head of the American Society for the Propagation of the Faith, died in 1979. His process of beatification is now underway.

a million and a half listeners a day (data from Audiradio), and is therefore rated among the most popular Italian radio stations. And of course in the United States, Mother Angelica's EWTN network continues to reach a large worldwide audience.

The mere “physical” presence of a person on the television screen often can have a very powerful effect. The relationship between John Paul II and television has only begun to be studied, but it is indisputable that in 1978 his powerful physical appearance, and his strong and well modulated voice, played an important role in transmitting, from the moment of his election, the message of a Church that was young and vibrant, with a message worth listening to.<sup>7</sup> The very style of John Paul II and his way of conducting himself made him a Pope who was very easy to present on television. Among the thousands of examples one could cite here, we can recall how pictures of the Pope spread around the whole world when, for the first time, he went down to the Basilica of St. Peter on Holy Friday to hear confessions. The impact these images had on world public opinion were probably—at least in the short run—much stronger than many speeches or documents of his.

Before turning to some specific reflections about the world of film and television, we can conclude these opening remarks with some sobering words by St. Josemaría, who said very clearly (and personally, I fully share this view<sup>8</sup>) that the modern means of communication are (at times without any explicit intent) “educators.” “They are educators, and carry out the role—often in a hidden and impersonal way—of teachers. Entrusted to them, almost unconditionally, are the intellects, and even the consciences of millions of people.”<sup>9</sup>

### Literature, film, television, and personal fulfillment

At times the danger may exist today that Catholics could consider movies and television series as a “foreign” territory, where it is very difficult to introduce not only the Christian message but even a lifestyle consistent with the Christian vision of the human person.

Not only in public opinion but also among those working in the field (especially among Europeans, though considerably less so among Americans who know the market better), many people think that successful narrative

7. See Giuseppe Mazza, *Karol Wojtyła, un Pontefice in diretta: Sfida e incanto nel rapporto fra Giovanni Paolo II e la tv*, 2006: Rai-Eri, Torino 2006.

8. See Gianfranco Bettegini and Armando Fumagalli, *Quel che resta dei media: Idee per un'etica della comunicazione*, revised edition, 2010: Milan, Angeli (first edition in 1998). Spanish trans. *Lo que queda de los medios: ideas para una ética de la comunicación*, 2001: La Crujía, Buenos Aires and Eunsa, Pamplona 2001..

9. St. Josemaría, Letter of April 30, 1946, no. 9 (AGP, P07 12, p. 25).

products (literature, film, television series) need to go against Christian morality. Unfortunately many specialists in the media often let themselves be led by ideas not based on empirical evidence—much more so than one might imagine. We know that this animosity towards a Christian vision of the human person could never be a requirement for success, since the requirements of God, that is, the moral law, could never be irrational or contrary to the human person's deepest aspirations. And it is confirmed by abundant empirical data, starting with the imperishable timeliness (proven by sales) of authors such as Shakespeare, Tolstoy or Dostoyevsky, and also by the fact that the movies with the greatest success throughout the world today almost always offer content that is consistent with a Christian anthropology.<sup>10</sup>

The reason for this is not hard to find. Any effective story, far from being an arbitrary creation of the imagination, is always, essentially, a response to a great moral question. The best schools of screenwriters are united in affirming that the most effective scripts present a main character who, after confronting a series of ever more challenging problems, is called to make a decision that determines in a definitive way who he or she is or, better, who he or she decides to be and, as a result, to forge one's own personal destiny.<sup>11</sup> In the great classics of film such as the movies directed by Frank Capra, the hero almost always has to confront ever more challenging situations in the effort to be true to one's moral principles; and after resisting almost to the limit of one's strength, salvation comes at the last moment as a reward (frequently unexpected) for being faithful to the moral good. In the Italian movie *Life is Beautiful* (awarded three Oscars and the top box office hit in Italy), the hero defends the innocence of his son to the point of joyfully sacrificing his own life, with the hope that his son can save himself, as later happens. Or to take another example from a film that has enjoyed widespread and permanent success, in *Finding Nemo* Marlin searches for his lost son Nemo, but he has to learn above all to control his own anxiety as a father while little Nemo has to learn to control his impatience. It

10. At the present moment (August 2011), the top ten movies in terms of world-wide box office success have been (without taking into account inflation, and therefore giving contemporary films an advantage): *Avatar*, *Titanic*, *The Lord of the Rings 3*, *Pirates of the Caribbean 2*, *Toy Story 3*, the last Harry Potter, another *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Alice in Wonderland*, *Transformers 3*, and *Batman: the Dark Knight*. In this ranking, the only surprising inclusion is the pantheistic vision of *Avatar*, which is a very special case, also in regard to the reasons for its success. *The Lord of the Rings* is a basically faithful adaptation of a novel with a deeply Christian vision of life; and films such as *Toy Story 3* contain human themes in deep harmony with a Christian vision of man. If we look at the top 100 box office successes of all time (data from the website [www.imdb.com](http://www.imdb.com)), the only films that openly conflict with a Christian vision are *The Da Vinci Code* (in 38th place), and another movie based on a book by the same author, *Angels and Demons*, which is currently number 91 and which presents less serious moral problems. Among these top 100 films, none of them, in my opinion, presents grave problems from the point of view of sexual or excessively violent content.

11. See for example, Robert McKee, *Story: substance, structure, style, and the principles of screenwriting*, Harper Collins, New York 1997; John Truby, *The Anatomy of Story*, Faber and Faber, New York 2007.

is not by chance that at the end of the movie, in the culminating moment, the two protagonists are saved together, when they put their trust in each other and rebuild a harmonious relationship.

All of this can be summed up by saying that every good story is an answer to the question, always in some sense radical, of the human person's happiness and final end. In other words, a good story is also the presentation of a moral principle; it is a moral reflection carried out not in an abstract way, but through a concrete case.

It is also true that rhetorical skill combined with a confused value system can enable an effective author to captivate his or her public and impose an erroneous anthropological vision. This is not only possible but in fact happens with a certain frequency, above all when a strong appeal is made to the emotions.

Nevertheless, here too we are convinced that the principle expressed in Aristotle's *Rhetoric* is still valid: given equal conditions, in itself the truth is always more convincing than error. The reason why relatively few "true" movies enjoy great success lies almost always in the poor artistic quality of the story with a "true" anthropological message, and not in the refusal of people to accept the truth.

These are considerations that are present (without entering into specific technical questions) in the Letter of St. Josemaría that we cited above. The situation does not seem to have changed much since 1946: "the reason for the success and almost complete dominance of the instruments of communication run by anti-Catholics lies not only in the fact that these people arrived first: it is also that ordinarily they are better, from the professional point of view . . . It is true that one can attract the public's attention with objects that a morally upright person, a responsible Christian, cannot use. From that point of view we need to admit that the corruptors have an easier task. But it is no less certain that if many Catholics worked in this field, with a knowledge appropriate to its specific demands, they would find a way to attract people through noble means. What one cannot do, with any hope for success, is to take up this work without having first studied and carefully experienced the psychology of each audience; without having a real dominion of the techniques of each means of communication; without having learned how to express oneself effectively—the gift of tongues!—in the language suited to news reporting, to novels, to images, to film scenes, to theatrical action."<sup>12</sup>

It is interesting to note that frequently the few "good" movies produced, if they are well made, enjoy great success. Some recent examples of

12. St. Josemaría, Letter, April 30, 1946, no. 39 (AGP, P07 12, p. 50).

film that offer a more or less positive message include the dozen films of Pixar (from *Toy Story* on), *The Lord of the Rings* films and the Harry Potter series. In addition, many financially “smaller” movies that are rich in moral and even directly spiritual values have enjoyed, either locally or worldwide, great success. These films have often won important prizes, and offer high quality content.<sup>13</sup>

Producing movies that are morally sound and financially successful is thus not a contradiction in terms. But it requires considerable effort. Some of the examples cited in the footnotes required ten years of hard work and revision before being brought to the screen. The problem is when people think success is easy and quick to attain, which makes them prey to pessimism when their first attempt fails.

The key professional skill required to be successful in this field is the ability to tell good stories well, which in the audiovisual world brings into play a varied and complex set of professional aptitudes. Moreover, my years working as a consultant for audiovisual productions has convinced me that the principal skill, the absolutely decisive one, is the ability to write good screenplays and evaluate the scripts written by others.

The big problem, therefore, is not that the public wants to see immoral stories. The real problem is that the creators of movie and fiction are rarely people with a Christian outlook. Both recent studies by some Americans, as well as my own experience in Italy and my knowledge of the situation in neighboring countries,<sup>14</sup> make clear that in fact (but not by right!) the film and television environment is dominated by an ideology that is often closed to any transcendent reality, and in certain important anthropological questions far from a Christian view of the human person.

In the end, the reason these negative views hold sway in the audiovisual media is not usually because the producers want to make more money. Often,

13. Considering only recent movies made in European countries, we could cite here, from Germany, *Das Leben der Anderen* (The Lives of Others), which cost four million euros and earned 77 million; from France, *Des hommes et des dieux* (Of Gods and Men), which cost 4 million Euros and earned 27 million in that country alone; from Italy *Benvenuti al Sud* (Welcome to the South) (30 million euros earned in Italy, for a cost of approximately 4 million); and from England, *The King's Speech*, which cost 15 million euros and earned approximately 400 million, and won several Oscars, including best picture and best script.

14. See, for example, Stanley Rothman and Amy Black, “Elites Revisited: America Social and Political Leadership in the 1990s,” in *International Journal of Public Opinion Research*, 1999, no. 2, pp.169-195; see also Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, Harper Collins, New York 1993; Gianfranco Bettetini – Armando Fumagalli, *Quel que resta dei media*, cit.; Armando Fumagalli, “Le elites mediatiche e le scelte culturali dei media,” in *Credere oggi*, no. 124 (2001), pp. 71-93.

as we have seen, the few “good” movies produced are those that attain the greatest popular success.

It is the so-called “media elite” who impose these ideas on the movie and television industry at the present moment. This group includes surprisingly few people who believe in God, or who find themselves in a stable marriage with children.<sup>15</sup> Rather it includes a great number of people with an unstable family and emotional life, who dedicate themselves soul and body to their work, living a bohemian lifestyle.<sup>16</sup> It is a lifestyle that is prey—not always, but quite frequently—to the dangers of the corruption brought about by an abundance of money, and to the restless tension of an unstable success attained today but possibly gone tomorrow.

Often those working in these fields are not driven by the desire to earn more money, but rather by their own ideological and artistic convictions and by the eagerness to receive recognition on the part of their colleagues: for a screenwriter, a director or an actor, an Oscar is valued much more highly than success at the box office.<sup>17</sup>

Of course there are also deeply religious people working in the world of movies and television, but today in fact they number very few. A very interesting recent book gathers testimony from Hollywood screenwriters and producers (many of them responsible for well-known movies or television series) who share the desire of living integrally their Christian faith (whether Catholic or Protestant). None of them sees any incompatibility between their personal beliefs and the public’s expectations, as if making “good” movies was equivalent to being condemned to failure.<sup>18</sup> The challenge they see rather is the effort needed to avoid superficiality and to tackle tough questions, and above all (in a hypercompetitive milieu that makes an idol of success) to find a way to live their personal lives with equilibrium and avoid being dragged along by the pressures of their professional environment and the anxiousness to attain great results.

15. An important exception is the production company Pixar, where almost all the writers and directors are married and have children. The movies produced there, especially *The Incredibles* and *Up*, and to a slightly lesser extent in *Toy Story*, *Finding Nemo* and all their other movies, reflect a much more positive vision of family relationships than that found in most movies produced by Hollywood or by the bohemian élites of the European film world.

16. In this regard, see the very interesting considerations in Charles Taylor, *Sources of the Self: The Making of Modern Identity*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989; and by the same author, *The Malaise of Modernity* (U.S. title: *The Ethics of Authenticity*), Harvard University Press, Boston, 1991; Colin Campbell, *The Romantic Ethic and the Spirit of Modern Consumerism*, Blackwell, Oxford 1987.

17. See here also Michael Medved, *Hollywood vs. America*, cit. Medved knows the Hollywood environment very well after working for many years as a movie critic.

18. See Spencer Lewerenz – Barbara Nicolosi, (eds.), *Behind the Screen*, Baker Books, Grand Rapids (Michigan) 2005;

### The drama of life and “virtue ethics”

Let us return to the connection between the construction of effective stories and moral reflection. As we said above, a well-told story ordinarily involves the question of what the “right” or “good” life is for a particular person in a specific situation—almost always one of struggle with the need to confront a dilemma that is often intellectually challenging.

To speak of a “good life” means, in the end, to speak of morality. Many recent documents of the Magisterium provide useful guidelines here, drawing especially on the writings of St. Thomas Aquinas and the Fathers of the Church. These include John Paul II’s encyclical *Veritatis Splendor* (1993), as well as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1992) and its *Compendium* (2005). The same is true of many contemporary philosophical works on morality that set forth the foundations for a “virtue ethics.”<sup>19</sup>

Moreover, many of these solid works on moral philosophy have stressed the importance of narratives in the moral formation of the person and a reconsideration of the fact that a certain unity exists (not an identity, but a close relationship) between philosophy and literature, morality and the narrative form.<sup>20</sup>

In this context, the teaching of St. Josemaría offers a very interesting vision. Without entering into the philosophical foundations of moral theology, he always insisted that the good life is our response to God’s calls to us during our lifetime. For St. Josemaría happiness (that is, a life that is good, the full realization of the human person) was impossible outside of union with God and the loving response to his requests. In his preaching he always stressed the close tie between faithfulness to God and happiness, between a morally good life and the fulfillment of the deepest yearnings of the human heart. Among the many published and unpublished texts that could be cited here, we can highlight two successive points in *The Forge*:

19. See for example, Servais Pinckaers, O.P., *Les sources de la morale chrétienne*, Editions Universitaires, Fribourg, 1985; (Engl. trans.) *The Sources of Christian Ethics*, CUA Press, 1995; and by the same author, *La morale catholique*, Les Editions du Cerf/FIDES, Paris, 1991; (Engl. trans.) “Morality,” *the Catholic View*, St. Augustine’s Press, South Bend, IN, 2003; Robert Spaemann, *Moralische Grundbegriffe*, H.C. Beck, Munich, 1986; (Eng. trans.) *Basic Moral Concepts*, Routledge, London, 1989; Giuseppe Abbà, *Felicità, vita buona e virtù. Saggio di filosofia morale*, Las, Torino 1989; Gabriel Chalmeta, *Ética especial*, Euns, Pamplona 1996; Ángel Rodríguez Luño, *Ética general*, Euns, Pamplona 2001; Martin Rhonheimer, *Die Perspektive der Moral. Grundlagen der philosophischen Ethik*, (Eng. trans.) *The Perspective of Morality: Philosophical Foundations of Thomistic Virtue Ethics*; Giacomo Simeone, *La felicità del bene, Vita e pensiero*, Milano 2002.

20. See the now classic work by Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory*, University of Notre Dame Press, South Bend, Ind. 1984; and the books by Charles Taylor cited above, *Sources of the Self* and *The Malaise of Modernity* [U.S. title *The Ethics of Authenticity*].

“I am every day more convinced that happiness in Heaven is for those who know how to be happy on earth.”<sup>21</sup>

“With crystal clarity I see the formula, the secret of happiness, both earthly and eternal. It is not just a matter of accepting the Will of God but of embracing it, of identifying oneself with it—in a word, of loving the Divine Will with a positive act of our own will.

“This, I repeat, is the infallible secret of joy and peace.”<sup>22</sup>

The same stress can be found in the teaching of Pope John Paul II on the foundations of the moral life. In an important homily given in the year 2000 on Mount Sinai, he said: “The Ten Commandments are not an arbitrary imposition of a tyrannical Lord. They were written in stone; but before that, they were written on the human heart as the universal moral law, valid in every time and place. Today as always, the Ten Words of the Law provide the only true basis for the lives of individuals, societies and nations. Today as always, they are the only future of the human family. They save man from the destructive force of egoism, hatred and falsehood. They point out all the false gods that draw him into slavery: the love of self to the exclusion of God, the greed for power and pleasure that overturns the order of justice and degrades our human dignity and that of our neighbor. . . . To keep the Commandments is to be faithful to God, but it is also to be faithful to ourselves, to our true nature and our deepest aspirations.”<sup>23</sup>

Many authors<sup>24</sup> have pointed to the importance of Karol Wojtyła’s theatrical experience in his youth, not only because of what it taught him about physical presence on the stage and how to dialogue with large crowds, but because it helped him understand the “drama of life” and the importance of human subjectivity and personal freedom when deciding how to incorporate into one’s life the objective moral law based on the universal demands of human nature.

In St. Josemaría, expressed in different language and based on an extensive pastoral and personal experience, we find a similar high regard for human subjectivity and freedom (in an epoch when Catholic pedagogy overvalued external obedience and a concern for results). For example, in a homily published in *Christ Is Passing By*, he says: “Christ’s work, which his Father entrusted to him, is being carried out. His power runs right through history, bringing true life with it . . . God wants us to cooperate with him in this task which he is carrying out in the world. He *takes a risk with our freedom* [italics in the Spanish] . . .

21. *The Forge*, no. 1005.

22. *Ibid.*, no. 1006.

23. Pope John Paul II, Celebration of the Word on Mount Sinai, February 26, 2000.

24. See here especially George Weigel’s extensive biography of John Paul II, first published in 1999: *Witness to Hope*, Harper Collins, New York.

God respects and bows down to our freedom, our imperfection and wretchedness.”<sup>25</sup>

And in another homily, in *Friends of God*, he writes: “How great a truth is this, which opens the way to freedom and gives it meaning throughout our lives . . . It is the knowledge that we have come from the hands of God, that the Blessed Trinity looks upon us with predilection, that we are children of so wonderful a Father. I ask my Lord to help us decide to take this truth to heart, to dwell upon it day by day; only then will we be acting as free men. Do not forget: anyone who does not realize that he is a child of God is unaware of the deepest truth about himself. When he acts, he lacks the dominion and self mastery we find in those who love our Lord above all else.”<sup>26</sup>

And in the same homily we read: “Where does our freedom come from? It comes from Christ our Lord. This is the freedom with which he has ransomed us (see Gal 4:31) . . . We Christians do not have to ask anyone to tell us the true meaning of this gift, because the only freedom that can save man is Christian freedom. I like to speak of the adventure of freedom, because that is how your lives and mine unfold. I insist that it is freely, as children and not as slaves, that we follow the path which our Lord has marked out for each one of us. We relish our freedom of action as a gift from God.”<sup>27</sup>

As a consequence, a “dramatist” (novelist, screenwriter, director) who is a believer can confront any question and problem in life with confidence, going right to the heart of the matter. And the more one succeeds in presenting a “true” picture of the human situation, the more in harmony with the faith will be the answers presented.

Thus the sense of divine filiation preached by St. Josemaría as a central element of Christian spirituality helps to rid us of any feeling of inferiority in the face of the topics that hold sway in today’s culture and the attempt to answer the radical questions of human existence outside of our relationship with God. It is impossible to give a true answer to the question about the meaning of our life (which, in the end, is the goal of literature as well as drama, film and television), without taking into account our relationship with God and his salvific plans for mankind.

Let us look at another passage from the letter we have already cited several times, which seems to us very eloquent: “Don’t be alarmed, then, by the situation today, or think that it has no solution. Don’t let yourselves be frightened

25. St. Josemaría, *Christ Is Passing By*, no. 113.

26. *Friends of God*, no. 26.

27. *Ibid.*, no. 35.

by the fury of the waves stirred up on the sea of this world. Don't seek to flee, because the world is ours: it is God's handiwork and he has given it to us as an inheritance. . . . We, who are children of God, brethren of Jesus Christ, share in his inheritance, which is the whole world: *si autem filii, et heredes: heredes quidem Dei, coheredes autem Christi.* (Rom 8:17); if children, then heirs, heirs of God and fellow heirs with Christ . . . Our Lord wants to be placed once more at the summit of all human activities. Particularly from us, he expects our service, our help to bring about an even greater harvest of Redemption, which is the only true freedom for mankind. We are working with this hope and this responsibility.”<sup>28</sup>

Hence if movies and television series today are, as it were, an “avant-garde laboratory” for moral and existential reflection<sup>29</sup> (which personally I am convinced is the case), it is even more important now to have Christians in these professional fields. In an attempt to draw a large audience, films often deal with the most controversial topics (at the risk of oversimplifying the situation, we could say that a burning issue in the nineties was the recognition of homosexuality, while in the past decade it has been euthanasia). This effort to “break new ground” is seen as guaranteeing interest on the part of the public and offers the sense of “novelty” and “audacity”<sup>30</sup> that is an important element in attracting viewers.

Therefore the presence of Christians today in the field of screenwriting is of great urgency. For it means being present in the “laboratory” where moral views are being forged that are lived out by a large part of society, especially in the more developed countries where the consumption of these media is so high that it has become pervasive.

### A personal relationship

Although at first sight seeming to militate against personal relationships, it is not true that the mass media are entirely impersonal. The modern means of communication not only make it possible to reach a large multitude of people

28. Letter of 30 April 1946, no. 46 (AGP, P07 12, pp. 183-184).

29. This reality varies of course depending on the country; my considerations are centered above all on Europe, North America and—to a lesser extent—on Latin America. TV movies, miniseries, and—especially in the North American market—long television series often present very sophisticated narrative reflections on life (for example, the series *Lost* or, in a very different way, a show like *The Simpsons*).

30. Bobette Buster, a well-known Hollywood consultant and adjunct professor of screenwriting at the University of Southern California, often stresses in her classes how movies with great impact need to confront “daring” topics and issues. She is referring here not to the trite tendency to present a shocking or non-conventional plot (a shortcut frequently used by second-rate writers, and that usually is not very effective in drawing interest), but rather to the daring needed to tackle moral and spiritual topics. Examples that could be cited here are two of the films mentioned above: *The Lives of Others*, on resisting oppression by a Communist regime, and *Life is Beautiful*, which deals with defending the innocence

in a very short time. In addition, when the viewer or reader is presented with a well-constructed narrative, it is a very effective way to reach the depths of that person's heart, and thus deeply influence decisions about one's goals in life.

The fear that the world of movies and television will become a substitute for personal relationships is easy to understand; although in our opinion this fear can be somewhat excessive. Certainly the intemperate and disordered use of these media presents a very real danger for the passive spectator. But reading a good book or watching a good movie can also give rise to emotions that open the doors of our heart. When I am immersed in reading an exciting story, I have the impression that the author of the novel is speaking directly to me. While a movie that draws me into its action so deeply makes me a friend and brother of the main character, creating a strong bond of empathy with the protagonist, whom I come to consider as a real person who can guide me in my own choices in life.<sup>31</sup>

In other words, these media are “mass” regarding the number of people involved, but they are strongly personal in their effect, and generate a very real intimacy.<sup>32</sup>

And this intimacy is engendered by a successful novel with hundreds of thousands of readers; by a television product in a country such as Italy with five, six, or even eight million people; or by a Hollywood movie with at times well over a billion spectators.

This paradoxical “mass intimacy” is today much easier to perceive thanks to the possibility of readers/spectators commenting on websites and the social net (another way of publicizing a work). Today the authors of successful narrative works receive such an avalanche of commentary and feedback that they could be overwhelmed; but it is, in any case, an empirical confirmation of how these works reach the hearts of a great number of people.<sup>33</sup>

of a young boy in extreme circumstances.

31. See here the reflections of Wayne C. Booth, *The Rhetoric of Fiction*, 2nd edition, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1983; reprinted Penguin, Harmondsworth 1987 (1st ed. 1961); and by the same author, *The Company We Keep. An Ethics of Fiction*, University of California Press 1988. Insightful reflections on the dynamics proper to movies and television can be found in Paolo Braga, *Dal personaggio allo spettatore. Il coinvolgimento nel cinema e nella serialità televisiva americana*, Angeli, Milano 2003.

32. John B. Thompson refers to this as “non-reciprocal intimacy at a distance” (John B. Thompson, *The Media and Modernity. A Social Theory of the Media*, Polity Press, Cambridge 1995).

33. A film director mentioned recently in a public interview how he had been surprised by an e-mail from a viewer. This woman said that, after seeing one of his movies that weekend (in which someone chooses to have an abortion, but another person says clearly that “one cannot throw away a child”), she had canceled her appointment to have an abortion. A former student of mine has written a very successful novel (with 400,000 copies sold in Italy in two years and translations in more than fifteen languages) that confronts deep existential questions about life with great wisdom. He has been receiving an immense number of e-mail messages, and commentaries on blogs and Facebook, that testify to how his

This capacity to reach a massive number of people but also to touch the heart of each reader or viewer is perhaps the most delicate aspect of modern communication media. But the union of these two realities makes it even more urgent for us Christians to be present there.

### A great opportunity

In this context, St. Josemaría's insistence that lay people become aware of their responsibility to be present at the crossroads of human relationships is especially relevant here. It is difficult to think of places in our day and age with a greater need for those who take their faith seriously. And he highlighted the great detriment to the Church that ensues from the absence of well-formed Christians in these immense worldwide "market places" of film and television.

St. Josemaría also stressed that the "apostolate of public opinion" is everyone's task and not an isolated "preserve" for highly specialized people. Nevertheless, as we see in a passage from his 1946 Letter cited above, this broadening of Christians' sense of responsibility in this area in no way eliminates the need for a specific and demanding preparation by those who want to work professionally in these media and influence them positively. It would be foolish to think that good will or good intentions would be sufficient here.<sup>34</sup>

Each of us, he insisted, should ask ourselves what we can do to help make Christ present also in this area. This effort may include writing letters to praise or protest about the content (always done so with a constructive spirit) in a newspaper article, movie or television program; or possibly organizing viewer or listener associations to exert more influence on the orientation of the media. It will also require being a responsible consumer of these media (thus also exerting an influence by contributing to their success or lack thereof). Some people may be in a position to invest in advertising, and thus select media that show a greater respect for the dignity of the human person. Parents can teach their children to be judicious in their use of the media and how to choose good quality programs; and they can set up film and reading forums for discussing worthwhile novels or movies and television programs, etc.

short novel has changed the life of one person after another, and has deeply touched the hearts of thousands of people: from a thirty five year old woman who said that she had changed her mind and decided to have children, to people who write that "it has changed my way of seeing the world." Reading the commentaries on this novella on the social network sites (Facebook, author's blog, etc.) has been extraordinarily instructive for me.

34. Barbara Nicolosi, a teacher and screen writer who works in Hollywood, has often stressed this point in recent years. See, for example, her essay in the volume *Behind the Screen*, cited above, and—among her more recent writings—the interview granted to *Aletheia Writing Magazine*, Summer 2011, pp. 18ff. (also available at <http://www.patheos.com/Resources/Additional-Resources/Storytelling-a->

For St. Josemaría, lay people's responsibility in this area stemmed from having received Baptism, and was simply a matter of living the social and cultural dimensions of the faith we have received. And we need to do so with a just pluralism (also in tastes and styles that are the result of legitimate preferences), but always with the personal consistency of being Christians "one hundred percent."

### It's not a utopia

Recently, in the main lecture hall of the Lateran University, a very interesting address was given by Ettore Bernabei, who for fourteen years (from 1961 to 1974) was director general of the Italian public television network RAI. Since 1992, he has been the promoter and president of a television production company, Lux Vide, that has produced programs with Christian values, which have enjoyed great success in Italy and frequently worldwide.<sup>35</sup> He was able to speak with the authority of one who has spent forty years on the frontlines of the demanding and competitive world of television communications: "In my experience in the media I have found that when one tries to inspire programs that further the common good, the public always responds positively."<sup>36</sup>

Many others have had similar experiences in their work in the field of communications.<sup>37</sup> Here I want to limit myself to some brief final considerations based on the experience of Ettore Bernabei, with whom the writer of this study has since 1999 worked closely on a number of projects. In the effort to produce high quality programs, the technical resources (into which many people mistakenly invest too much of their energy, diverting it from the narrative, philosophical, and theological aspects involved) are always a secondary element, which needs to be put at the service of the construction of the story, that is, the content one wants to transmit. Thus the personal has priority over the technical. Lux Vide productions has always placed its emphasis—including investment and use of financial resources—on the phase that in the movie industry

*Dying-Art-Nick-Muzekari-08-05-2011).*

35. This production company specializes in high budget television miniseries that frequently deal with historical and religious themes, and that explicitly aim at offering entertainment in accord with Christian values. Many of its programs have had record audiences in Italy, and have been broadcast widely in other countries. Some of these programs have been nominated for and also received the Emmy prize, which is considered the "Oscar" of television throughout the world.

36. Ettore Bernabei, *Lectio magistralis*, Pontifical University of the Lateran, Rome, May 16, 2011, partially reproduced in *L'Osservatore Romano*, 16-17 May 2011, p. 4, under the title "*La televisione può salvarci dalla Torre di Babele.*" Some important reflections on his work can also be found in Ettore Bernabei (with Gabriele La Porta), *Tv qualità. Terra promessa*, Eri, Roma 2003.

37. For example, the efforts of Act One ([www.actoneprogram.com](http://www.actoneprogram.com)) in Los Angeles, or in the Protestant world, the production company Walden Media. I would also include here my own experience in setting up in 2000, with the help of professional colleagues at the Catholic University of the Sacred

is called “development,” that is, the patient, deep and demanding work of screenwriting required to perfect the script for the intended project, sacrificing some of the budget available for staging and production. This strategy, not followed by many producers today, is in the opinion of this writer absolutely the best procedure, and has shown itself to be effective both in the quality of the products as well as in success with viewers.<sup>38</sup>

Certainly the task here is not easy, and the path that has to be followed is a long and arduous one. But in this new century and millennium, there is a renewed awareness on the part of Christians of their responsibility to be present in these media. We are referring both to initiatives fostered by the bishops (for example, the Catholic television station TV2000 in Italy or the renewed efforts of Catholic newspapers such as *Avvenire*), and also and above all to the personal initiatives on the part of Catholic lay men and women.

This writer’s ten years of experience in this field amply testifies to the fact that truly, as St. Josemaría liked to say, “the divine paths of the earth have been opened up,” also in the media and the world of communication.

Heart in Milan, what is now the Master’s Program in Fiction and Cinema.

38. In contrast, a frequent temptation when planning and producing a movie or a television program, and for educational centers such as universities, is to view the essential thing as being at the forefront in technology, to have the newest instruments and control devices, etc. In our opinion, the key goal for a university is to form professionals with a broad and deep culture (and with a solid grounding in the faith). And in the field of producing programs, to enable people to conceptually develop projects in the required depth (and therefore also to give them the time and financial resources required to work as well as possible). Today people often launch out to produce a script before studying and developing their projects carefully. And thus unfortunately it is very easy to waste a great deal of money in movies and television.