

A REVIEW OF “DECREE ON THE MEDIA OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS” *INTER MIRIFICA*

STANISLAUS CHIMEZIE UKOHA UMEH
(Deputy Editor)

The “Decree on the Media of Social Communications” *Inter Mirifica* solemnly promulgated by His Holiness Pope Paul VI in December 4, 1963, is one of the documents of the Second Vatican Council. This conciliar document is divided into two brief chapters: ‘On the teaching of the Church’ and ‘on the pastoral activity of the Church’; with ‘introduction’ and ‘appendices’ preceding and following the two chapters. By way of introduction, the document started by acknowledging the tremendous technological discoveries, which, as they were, are products of the great talents exhibited by men and women of the modern era and made possible by the grace of God. These discoveries did uncover new avenues of communicating most readily news, views and teachings of every sort. The most important inventions include the press, movies, the radio, and television, which cover many people, and for which they are called the media of social communication. This acknowledgement goes a long way to rid technology of any reductionist depiction as though it was evil. Instead, it shows that men and women of the modern era have lived up to the injunction to guard the earth by creating things that ease life, make positive progress and contribute to the spread and support of the Kingdom of God. However, the Church also acknowledges that when misused, some technological innovations can harm society. That is why she beckons on the laity to strive to instil a human and Christian spirit into the media, so that they may be by the great expectations of humanity and God’s design.

In the first chapter, the council indicates the importance of media in spreading the Good News of salvation. It is in line with God’s design that the Church should use the media to preach the Good News of salvation to all humanity. The reason for this is that the Church’s target is to reach all and sundry, and since the media of social communication can get many persons, it becomes a veritable tool for spreading the Gospel. First, however, she evaluates each of the media, and by knowing their nature and what they are being used to propagate, she chooses the

best of the media in sharing the Gospel. This is so as not to introduce people to a platform that could end up scaring them from accepting the Gospel. Thus, she calls for a proper moral outlook on the use of these media, and she encourages the pursuit of truth; for that what is communicated should always be accurate and complete, within the bounds of justice and charity, in the manner that is proper and decent, and enthrone the absolute primacy of the objective moral order. This is in response to specific questions that have been vigorously aired in contemporary times.

Equally, the Council calls for the promotion of sound public opinion with the use of media of social communication both in the private and public spheres; while exhorting the users or recipients to always favour those opinions with quality moral goodness, knowledge-based, and artistic and technical merits. And to do this, they are encouraged to get themselves updated about judgments passed by authorities competent in these matters. These judgements help them make good use of any medium of communication at their disposal. What is to be promoted will always be the common good of all, and so the moral responsibility for the use of media of social communication rests on all, producers and viewers alike, content creators and audience alike; all must ensure that the common good is what is being communicated and promoted by the media. A typical way of exemplifying this is to ensure that whatever is being put out in the media would enhance the young people's decent amusement and cultural uplift. Thus, the Council charged public authorities with three basic things: firstly, ensuring the freedom of information, in which people are not silenced simply because their views are regarded as second class; secondly, ensuring that the health of its citizens is protected from whatever information that would harm them. However, care should be taken to keep the first two together by giving true information the second label to silence it or flag it down. And thirdly, ensuring the protection or safeguard of the young ones; from any printed matter and performances that may be harmful at their age.

In the second chapter, the Council beckons on all the Church's children (both pastors and the lay faithful) to make effective use of the media of social communication in their various apostolic endeavours; without neglecting the circumstances and conditions of their apostolates. It asks them to proactively guard against harmful development peculiar to those areas with low morals and an absence of religion. Here, the Council somewhat ventures into a more pastoral or practical approach to using media for social communication. In this pastoral approach, the Council calls for the fostering of print media (at best, an establish-

ment of Catholic press), whether owned by ecclesiastical authority or laymen or laywomen. The essence is to ensure that people read the news and reflect on the teachings that promote the Catholic faith, healthy living and family values. The second is the promotion of the production of films; the Council appeals that such be done by the natural law and advertising of events that enrich family life and that displays that give entertainment and showcase arts and talents should be fostered for the young ones. The third is to create radio and television stations to propagate the faith and for decent programmes. The fourth is to promote, once again and among the young ones, the ancient art of drama, which has a subtle way of communicating culture and values. To realise these four factors effectively, the Council calls for the prompt appointment of: on the one hand, those (priests, religious, lay people) who are skilled in those fields, and for the establishment of school faculties where more personnel could be trained for those jobs; and on the other hand, critics who have skills in making a good judgement of whatever is being put up in the media of social communication.

Given the different cultural backgrounds, the Council advocates that what is shared through these media respects the variety of cultures, such that it becomes essential and appreciated whatever is communicated through them. It equally calls on those who are financially capable of assisting the Church in establishing media houses and media sources, such that information or news get to the Church's children promptly and without delays and that it be accessible to all, to avoid getting a thwarted message of salvation (presumably from other sources who lack the fundamental knowledge and authority in the Church's teachings). On the part of the ecclesiastical authorities, the Council recommends a diocesan day of prayer and animation on the matters concerning the media; the bishop's supervision on the diocesan level, the media activities; an establishment of the national office for media communication that connects the diocesan establishments; an establishment on the international plane that in turn coordinates the national affairs; and finally for the Supreme Pontiff to see that an office of the Holy See takes the task of overseeing the matters that relate to media of social communication at the universal level.

The document ended with the section "appendices", which recommends that through collaboration at all levels (diocesan, national, international, and universal), there be an issuance of a religious instruction that puts forth a guideline for the use of media of social communication; which the Council exhorts all the Church's children to adhere to and apply in their respective fields.