

## ONE MISSION, MANY SCREENS

In the past five years I have visited Jesuits working in the field of communication all over the world, and now have a much clearer sense of what we are doing. What is most common is the extent to which our works are not common but local and inculturated. Puskat Audio Visual Services in Yogyakarta, Indonesia, includes a subtext of interreligious dialogue and respect for other cultures as an integral part of its professional video training in a way that parallel training centers in other parts of the world would never do. The Indonesian context of hundreds of islands filled with people of different languages, cultures and religions makes apparent the motive for such an approach. The EMRC video production center in Kolkotta, India, is an integral part of the developing national educational TV network of India. Unlike production centers in the United States, EMRC does not have to worry about fund-raising or getting air time, but it does have to carefully nuance its Christian perspective in programs created for a predominantly Hindu country. Polish Jesuits who direct the Catholic segment of state television and radio in a predominantly Catholic country face a much different challenge.

Local context and inculturation clearly characterize Jesuit communication works. At the same time, I find myself looking for a unifying element that will allow the communication apostolate to grow and claim a clear identity, and importance, in the eyes of other Jesuits. I don't find this universal element in a single big production, like a movie that we would distribute world-wide, in Hollywood fashion, or one single over-arching publication. What we need is not so much a common product, but a clearer sense of a common mission.

Before coming to Rome, I attended the Summit 2000 meeting in Toronto. Among the many media professionals attending was Michelle Miller from the Public Broadcasting System (PBS). In her presentation she

described PBS' motto as "One mission, many screens." Her underlying concept was the new synergy between television and the web, with PBS designing content once and then delivering it in multiple ways.

This motto could apply to the Society. What if we thought of the Society of Jesus as a truly world-wide organization with many screens but only one mission? And what if we located that core mission in the source of what unifies the great diversity among Jesuits—the Spiritual Exercises?

Unity, however, is difficult in part because our core spirituality leads to our being interested in an incredible range of subjects. We find everything important; indeed, it would be hard to imagine an issue to which some Jesuit is not passionately devoted. I would argue, however, that we ought to focus more attention on this central content. We also ought to pay less attention to apostolic sectors (like education, communication and spirituality) and organizational units (such as provinces, schools, parishes and social institutes). We act as though these were autonomous, isolated entities with little in common, but these categories are self-limiting and prevent us from being aware of the mission we have in common. Focusing attention on our content would enable us to become aware of what we share as well as how we are different.

Why not look to the Exercises for the unifying element that would allow the communication apostolate to achieve the growth we want? Then we could focus on a central content that we deliver in multiple ways. At its root our Jesuit content is a way of conceiving and practicing a deeply religious life that flows out of the conversion experience in the Spiritual Exercises. This central content is difficult to describe because we take it for granted; it unites and defines us but remains elusive when we try to explain it. Colleagues and friends can describe it anecdotally; the secondary education association in the United States has invested a great amount of time developing programs to propagate it systemically. This content is what gives a Jesuit school its unique identity and shapes the kind of advocacy that a Jesuit social center promotes.

I propose that we look into the heart of our Jesuit identity, into the core of what unifies us despite the differences of language, culture and age: the experience of making the Spiritual Exercises. By focusing more attention on the Exercises we will strengthen the communication apostolate. And I propose that we pursue this strategy by collaborating with Jesuits in other fields, especially spirituality and pastoral work.

Our record of collaboration is mixed. The Wisconsin province used Don Doll's photographs in a book it created to introduce the Exercises in Everyday Life to lay colleagues of the province. Teatro la fragua in Honduras developed a distinctive theatrical method of presenting Gospel stories which it calls "Evangelio en vivo"; actors from the theater company

have given workshops in this method to young people in parishes throughout the country.

I could easily balance these examples of collaboration with contrasting experiences of Jesuits in communication who feel isolated and never receive invitations to share their skills with other apostolic sectors. It does no good just to complain, however, If the situation is going to change, the impetus must come from Jesuits who already understand the contribution that better communication can make to an important project.

The best opportunity to demonstrate what we have to offer lies in the Spiritual Exercises. In some ways, this is already happening; the addition of Doll's powerful photographs strengthened the text of the Wisconsin book and serves as an example of how images can complement the text. Some of the most successful web sites, such as Ireland's Sacred Space, attest to the huge appetite people have for accessible, easy to use help in praying. Jesuits in Manila send out prayer messages via SMS text messages on cellular telephones, and the novice director in Singapore has a daily spiritual message that he sends out to an email list. Various media are already playing an important role in the apostolate of the Exercises.

Communicators can make a unique contribution in part because we have a mindset of being aware of what an "audience" would respond to and of knowing how to create programs that respond to those needs. And we are used to thinking in terms of large audiences and works that can be used again and again. For the past three years I have been helping to direct a week-long retreat for diocesan seminarians from the United States who are studying theology in Rome. I see first hand the power of individual direction; but I also see the cost in manpower as it takes seven directors to handle the thirty-some men in each retreat.

The hunger for spirituality is greater than our ability to satisfy it on an individual basis. The late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin of Chicago coined a phrase that is pertinent. He talked about the "middle millions" – people who believe and want to grow in their faith but who are neither specialists nor academicians. A relatively small number of people have the time and preparation to make the full, month-long Exercises, but a huge number of people could profit from what the Exercises have to offer. And the Constitutions of the Society clearly call for Jesuits to make a preferential option for helping more people rather than fewer.

In paragraph 648 the Constitutions mandate that Jesuits will "endeavor to be profitable to individuals by spiritual conversations, by counseling and exhorting to good works, and by conducting Spiritual Exercises." The next paragraph says that the Exercises in their entirety should be given to only a few people, those who could be expected to yield a significant result from the effort invested by the director. On the other hand, "the exercises

of the first week can be made available to large numbers; and some examinations of conscience and methods of prayer (especially the first of those which are touched on in the Exercises) can also be given far more widely." This latter recommendation echoes paragraph 409 which said that scholastics can give exercises of the first week but not ordinarily the Exercises in their entirety.

Part VII of the Constitutions deals with the distribution of members of the Society. In paragraph 622 Ignatius enunciates the principle that "the following procedure of selection ought to be used. When other considerations are equal, ...that part of the vineyard ought to be chosen which has greater need. Consideration should also be given to where the greater fruit will probably be reaped through the means which the Society uses." Paragraph 623 continues: "The same norm should be kept in view, namely, that of considering the greater divine honor and the greater universal good."

Further down in section f, Ignatius raises a point that touches on the theme of the middle millions: "When everything mentioned above is equal and when there are some occupations which are of more universal good and extend to the aid of more of our fellowmen, such as preaching or lecturing, and others which are concerned more with individuals, such as hearing confessions or giving Exercises; and when further it is impossible t

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accomplish both sets of occupations simultaneously, preference should be given to the first set."

These citations address the choice of ministries, but they underscore the potential of communication to serve as a tool for helping "more of our countrymen."

Few communication specialists make the Exercises a focus of their professional work, and I can easily imagine the comments, "Leave it to the spirituality experts; it's not our business." But our business as communicators does involve reaching out to many people (Bernardin's middle millions), and that is where the next stage of growth is going to come in the Society's renewal of the Exercises.

The first stage began after the Second Vatican Council when the Society rediscovered the practice of directing the Exercises rather than just preaching them. When I first made the Spiritual Exercises as a novice in 1964, our novice director preached "points" four times a day to a group of 30 novices. He was very good and the experience was powerful for me but it did not compare to my experience of making the Exercises as a tertian when Joe Tetlow directed the five of us individually. Only after the retreat did I learn how diverse a path each of us followed.

In the second stage the Society widened the pool of potential exercitants by offering the Exercises according to the 19th Annotation, or as it is commonly known, the Exercises in Everyday Life. Ignatius' gift was no longer restricted to those who could take one month or even one week off to devote to a retreat. Since this method allows people to pray through the Exercises while they continue their normal schedule of responsibilities, many more people can have the experience. The pool of those willing to serve as directors also grew. Instead of a handful of "experts" who know the subtle distinctions of the graces of each Week, a cohort of directors has emerged who are able to lead others in the experience that they themselves have already had. One of the resources that contributed to this growth was the handbook, "Choosing Christ in the World," which Joseph Tetlow SJ wrote and I designed. Although I have done magazines, web sites, videos and photography, I look back on the experience of creating that book as one of my most productive apostolic experiences in terms of the impact it has had. This

experience convinced me of the contribution that communication could make to the Exercises.

Now I think we are in the early stages of the third stage: expanding the implications of the Exercises beyond the retreat setting. I like to refer to this third stage as "Everday Life in the Spirit of the Exercises."

Some say that we are exploring what the 18th Annotation calls for as we explore issues like these:

- ❖ What do people do after the retreat?
- ❖ What do people do when their lives have been profoundly changed and they want that change to continue?
- ❖ What are the implications of the Exercises for living out the process of conversion that begins in the very distinct and out-of-the-ordinary environment of a retreat but should not end there?
- ❖ What do we offer people who have not made the Exercises but hunger for an experience of God and the transformation that follows?

We do not yet have much to offer in a systematic, well-developed fashion although some creative people have found ways to expand the reach of the Exercises. More work lies ahead. Behind us is the memory of a wide variety of practices that Jesuits once promoted. Our predecessors promoted a regime of prayer and pious practices such as the rituals to honor Mary during the month of May. It would be hard to update old practices – were that possible or desirable – but I think we face the much

greater challenge of teasing out the implications of the Exercises beyond what Ignatius wrote.

One of the central implications runs contrary a common contemporary presupposition that the search for God is an individual affair. It has become somewhat of a truism for people to happily claim that they are “spiritual” but to deny they are religious, in the sense of belonging to a specific faith community. Growing in faith means becoming part of a faith community which celebrates and ritualizes conversion. Since conversion means taking responsibility for the consequences of my decisions about faith, the exercitant faces the consequence that Christ calls those who become disciples to pray together. But how do they gather and pray? And how do they continue struggling with conversion and learning more about faith?

All of this is fertile grounds for apostolic collaboration; developing this third stage is not just the business of Jesuits in communication, but neither does it belong only to the spirituality experts, nor only to those experienced in pastoral work. It demands all of these skills and more.

And collaboration is the road out of the frustration that too many Jesuits experience when they devote themselves to the field of communication. Men talk about not being sufficiently understood or appreciated, about conflict with superiors who don't see why so much money should go to advanced equipment that seems somehow beside the point of our vocation. Communication has drifted to the margins of the Society's work to some extent and enjoys a sort of *laissez-faire*, benign neglect. Some enjoy the freedom of action this neglect allows, but too many are frustrated.

The answer to such frustration will not come from a better articulation of why communication is important. General congregations have already stated that clearly enough. The problem is not so much that the Society does not appreciate the concept of communication but that it does not know how communication relates to our other Jesuit activities.

In the past decade the Society has discovered a rich vein of energy in developing videos and publications that deal with Jesuit and Ignatian identity projects for our schools. Such materials serve a clear need and have a perceptible impact in supporting our own institutions. Now we face a moment of even greater opportunity. Instead of charging off to thousands of distinct “screens,” Jesuits in communication need to focus on one mission that can unite us and give direction to our talents. If the Society of Jesus as a body focuses its apostolic priorities on offering its core mission to as many people as possible, then the means necessary to achieve them will be more clear. And the contribution of communication will also be clear.

