

INTER MIRIFICA A STILL RELEVANT DOCUMENT

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Abstract

This article presents an issue raised in the discussion on the validity of the teaching of the Roman Catholic Church in the context of the means of social communication (the mass media). The authors would like at first to remind the attendant circumstances of creating the ‘Inter mirifica’ decree in relation to the whole Catholic doctrine concerning the media. Furthermore, they discuss the document itself – the history of its origin, its main assumptions and its purport. The last part of this text aims at indicating the significance and validity of this decree.

Keywords: theology, studies, Vaticanum II, media, theories

1. Introduction

The attitude of the Church towards the media has been evolving over a span of the centuries. The initial distrust moved over for the resolution to exploit the media as means of humanization having a civilizing effect, i.e. helping people to become more humane [Benedict XVI, *Caritas in veritate*, 2009, No. 73]. However, this can occur exclusively when the media shall be used as tools meant to serve the human dignity and to disseminate the ideas of truth, goodness and beauty.

The decree *Inter mirifica* – one of the first documents issued by the Second Vatican Council – has a particularly important place among the statements of the Church related to the subject of the media. Although frequently it is said to be shallow and incomplete or even not theological, it has anyway set trends in the context of the way the Church perceives the media and it has formed new perspectives related to exploiting the media as means of evangelization.

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2. Analysis

2.1. *Evolution of the Catholic media doctrine*

In order to analyse the *Inter mirifica* decree properly one must present it in the context of history as well as of the doctrine and discipline (practice) – the teaching of the Church. To put in in the general way, the first model of relationships between the Church and the social communication media, which existed from the 15th to the 20th century, appeared to be ineffective, since as far as the print and popularization of books and – later newspapers and magazines – meant control and censorship, including creating the lists of forbidden books. These practices were most distinct in the 19th century when a sudden development of the press started. The 20th century witnessed an evolution of the new audio and audio-visual media: radio, film, television and it quickly became obvious that any form of Church's censorship concerning them shall not be possible to be executed in practice. What is more, it was apparent that in the context of the developing liberal and democratic ideas such control cannot be mentally accepted even by people declaring themselves to believe in God and belonging to the Church community. Therefore, in the 20th century the media doctrine of the Church had to undergo a specific change and evolved from the system of control into arousing the sense of responsibility of the authors, i.e. the producers of media products, as well as of the broadcasters and the recipients of the media messages. Correct and thorough analysis of the *Inter mirifica* decree of the Second Vatican Council enforces the need to recall the preceding historical and doctrinal context, namely the papal teaching on the mass media that had directly predated issuing of the *Inter mirifica* decree. The Popes leading the Church before the Second Vatican Council - Pius XI (1922-1939) and Pius XII (1939-1958) used to make statements on the social communication means and by doing so they had significant influence on the form of the media doctrine created during the Second Vatican Council [1].

2.2. *Mass media in the teaching of Pope Pius XI and Pope Pius XII*

The immense technological advancement that took place in the 20th century resulted in a breakthrough within the field of communication on an unprecedented scale; the development of the new technologies contributed to sudden evolution of the mass media. They became something more than just means of distributing information – they started to popularize various ideologies, models and styles of life, becoming also sources of entertainment, as well as the tools used during the evangelization process, being – as such – closely watched by the Church in the context of its teaching and theological reflection. Its direct motif was the popularization on the media such as the radio, film and television, which were something new in comparison with the books and press. The effect of the sound and picture as well as the widespread fascination with the cinema and film, especially the immense influence the last two had on their recipients,

pushed Pope Pius XI into issuing an encyclical entitled *Vigilanti cura* (1936). It was addressed, primarily, to the American bishops and it was the first such a document devoted purely to the topic of cinematography. Initially, film was treated as a kind of ludic entertainment, but later it was recognized as a tool of evangelization; the Pope expressed his support of any actions aiming at ennobling the film, indicating that it may have a positive or negative influence on the viewers [2, 3].

Pope Pius XII was very experienced in the field of exploiting the mass media as he closely followed the process of their development, concentration on the radio, film and television. He frequently made statements related to the journalists' ethics and the moral responsibility of the authors of the media messages. In the encyclical *Miranda prorsus* (1957) he included a synthesis of the teaching about the mass media [2, p. 43-67]. Above all, he emphasized the fact that the mass media – as the amazing technological inventions – are the fruit of the human genius, and therefore – at the same time – a gift of God accepted by the Church with great joy. The Pope also indicated that it is necessary to take proper care of them exercising vigilance at the same time. He called on the addressees to make sure that the mass media serve popularizing mostly these values which improve the mankind. Therefore Pius XII opposed the false understanding the freedom of speech perceived as the freedom to produce the messages lacking the reference to the moral order, faith and decency. The Pope recognized the fact that the media recipients crave mostly entertainment and he put a great stress on the role of the social communication means in the work aiming at promoting the culture and spiritual values. He was of the opinion that the primary mission of the media is to popularize the ideas of truth and goodness, appealing for using the mass media for the moral improvement of the man. Again he pointed out to the moral dimension of any information to be distributed and warned against using the media for the purpose of anti-religious propaganda. A crucial element of the papal teaching became a postulate concerning the proper formation of the media recipients. The idea to educate the listeners and viewers included not only the instructions on the appropriate language for each type of the media, but also indications related to moulding the conscience in order to make it able to evaluate the received messages. Pius XII spoke with a specific concern about educating the youth in the context of the fascination with the new media the young people expressed. He also made a good remark about the presence of the media in the homes which lead to his call to keep prudence and good sense while using the mass media. A detailed part of the encyclical was related to the problems characteristic for the each type of the mass media – the cinematography, television and radio. Finally, the Pope accentuated the need for the priests to be knowledgeable about the world of the media and able to exploit them in their priesthood [Pius XII, Encyclical *Miranda prorsus*, 1957, p. 3–4, 9–17, 33].

2.3. The Council teaching about the media - *Inter mirifica* decree

Although at the moment when the opening of the Ecumenical Council it might appear that the teaching of Pope Pius XII about the media is still valid and the content of the *Miranda prorsus* encyclical embody the synthesis of the Catholic media doctrine, the Second Vatican Council (1958-1963) opened under the pontificate of Pope John XXIII (1958-1963) on 11 October 1962 and closed under Pope Paul VI already at the beginning made the social communication means the subject of reflection and teaching. In 1963 a new document – the *Inter mirifica* decree concerning the mass media was issued. Approved on December 4, 1963, it was announced to be the second Council document. The subject of the social communication and the mass media appeared now and then also in other Council documents published later and the doctrine of Vatican II on the social communication should be approached in also the light of the Pastoral Constitution on the Church In The Modern World *Gaudium Et Spes*, which included the teaching on the human dignity and activity, peace and developing the community of the nations [Documents of Vaticanum II: declaration on Christian education *Gravissimum educationis*, p. 4; Decree *Ad Gentes* on the mission activity of the Church, p. 19, 26; Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the modern world *Gaudium et Spes*, p. 12–17, 25, 33–39, 53–56, 78, 83].

Before Vatican II Domenico Tardini had sent 2598 letters to the Council consultants, ranging from cardinals to lay persons. They were supposed to suggest topics to be reflected upon during the Council. It occurred that among the 9348 suggestions only 18 were related to the mass media – but one should still acknowledge this to be an important breakthrough in the attitude to the ecumenical councils teaching, since at that time such councils would rather issue documents of dogmatic, liturgical or church discipline related character [4]. A draft of this document was one of the first prepared during this council. Along with six other drafts it was sent to the Council Fathers of Vatican II in July 1962 [5]. The hasty elaborating of the *Inter mirifica* decree might have indicated the immense significance of the presence of the media for the Church, especially of the influence they had on the recipients, which, naturally, included the community of the faithful.

The fast pace of the works on the social communications media decree naturally excluded performing any thorough analyses and discussing in detail the numerous issues in this field. The Council was discussing the media subject for three days only. By some people it might have been interpreted as dealing with trivial subjects in the context of doctrine and liturgy teaching [6]. After this discussion the document on the media was reduced as far as its length was concerned – from the initial 11 chapters just two remained, and the number of articles was reduced by 90 [7]. The final version of the *Inter mirifica* decree can count only 24 articles on 8 pages. It is worth mentioning that this is the first Church document of such a great importance concerning all the media existing at that time. The high level of universalism of the Council's message was then a result of the need to touch upon the subject of the media as a whole.

The origins of the *Inter mirifica* decree and discussing the media issues was the awareness of the fact that the media had a devastating effect on the conscience of their recipients, leading to undermining the authority of the family and school, and in effect to disintegration of the traditional morality, by popularizing practical hedonism and materialism. The decree on the media was prepared by a commission dealing with the lay apostate, but the Council decided to reduce its content that was presented to its members [8, 9]. At the beginning of the discussion it seemed as if it was dominated by a negative vision of the media, which meant that some of the fathers assumed that the main source of evil was secularity and laicisation. However, it must be recalled that in the biblical Sodom and Gomorrah the sin prevailed, although there were no mass media (Genesis 19.1-25, Deuteronomy 29.22, Jeremiah 49.18).

By precluding the demonizing of the media, the *Inter mirifica* decree reminded about their positive value and significance in the contemporary world, resulting from the influence the media had on the whole human community. Bearing in mind that the influence of the media might be positive or negative, the Church called for observing the moral order both by the media owners and senders as by the recipients. Shaping a decent perception of the messages sent by the mass media, which should be active, conscious and selective was one of the principal postulates of Vatican II teaching, according to which using the social communication means for evangelization purposes is acceptable. Emphasizing the necessity of moulding a proper conscience in the context of exploiting the mass media was completed by a specific issue, namely communicating the truth. The decree also stressed the human right to receive information, which should be true, integral, decent, appropriate and in accordance with the norms of love and justice, i.e. respecting the moral rights, human dignity and bringing benefits for the society. The decree also referred to the primacy of the moral order in relation to the issues of art and aesthetics along with the idea of portraying evil. Moreover, *Inter mirifica* emphasized in particular shaping the proper attitude of the mass media messages recipients, calling for responsibility, listening to the noble conscience while evaluating the worthiness of the mass media messages, providing the children and youth with proper education in the spirit of discipline and temperance in the context of using the mass media. Vatican II reminded the mass media authors about their moral duty in the field of decent usage of their tools, appealing for responsibility and being guided by the common good. The media were also pointed out as the tools of moulding and spreading the right public opinion. Thus its role in the social life was, by the way, appreciated [10]. The document contained as well a call for protecting the youth against the harmful aspects of the mass media influence. The ideas mentioned above and included in the Vatican II *Inter mirifica* decree should be evaluated in a positive way since it is a message which is still valid regardless the appearance of the Internet and the so-called 'new media' [11].

Attention should be paid to the notion of the social communication means, which was applied by the Council. Purposefully the more popular concepts like ‘mass communication means’ or ‘mass media’ were not used, because ‘social communication means’ idea suggests that the media cannot be used for the purposes of propaganda and steering people’s behaviour and that they pursue an important social mission in the service of the society. It is worth noticing that the expression ‘social communication means’ appear also in numerous legal documents, among others in the Code of Canon Law of 1983 and the Constitution of the Republic of Poland dated 1997 [10, p. 212].

Addressing the pastoral issues related to the functioning of the social communication means, the Second Vatican Council recommended that they be used during the apostolic work and accentuated the significance of the Catholic press for moulding the public opinion, demanding the proper formation of the clergy and laity in the context of the media knowledge and the social teaching of the Church. The Council stressed also the need for creating an appropriate formation that would prepare people, youth especially, for receiving the media messages [Vaticanum II, *Decree on the media of social communications Inter Mirifica*, No. 87–94]. It seems that the Council fathers must have overestimated the value, meaning and power of influencing of the Catholic press. They did not notice that right before their eyes the verbal culture, including the reading habits, started to collapse giving way to sudden expansion of the visual civilization, the foremost medium being the cinema at first, and then the television. It was only later observed by Pope Paul VI, who taught that the TV is a new way of recognition, proving the development of new civilization – that of the image [Paul VI, *Apostolical letter Octogesima adveniens*, 1971, No. 20].

The Council doctrine was characterized by temperance, good sense and a high degree of generality, which allowed for feeling out the detailed analysis of specific problems. The syntax of the teaching included in the *Inter mirifica* decree indicates a generally positive assessment of the mass media, which, however, does not exclude the fact that sometimes they have negative influence. It also points out to the possibility of using them for evangelization purposes and emphasized the right of the Church to own her own media, stresses the necessity to create proper formations of both senders and recipients. It recalls that the man has a right to be informed – it is his asset which should be guaranteed by the lay authorities. It defines the moral principles which refer also to information. It calls for involving the clergy and laity in creating and supporting the Catholic media, warns against the negative impact of the mass media and demand the youth to be protected against demoralization and scandal [12]. It is worth to notice the question of the term used by the Church – “social communication means” instead of “mass communication means”, since the notion preferred by the Council show the personalistic perspective of the reality in a more effective way [2, p. 87].

3. Discussion - Inter mirifica decree: results, inspiration and consequences

Apart from defining in a clear way the fundamentals of the contemporary Catholic media doctrine, the *Inter mirifica* decree gave rise to specific results. Applying the Vatican II postulates, in 1967 Pope Paul VI initiated celebrating World Social Communications Day within the Church. Papal messages delivered on this occasion are to evaluate the current tendencies in the field of the media and meant to boost the reflection as well as to inspire practical activities. The subject of the media became thus an element of regular papal teaching, which strongly emphasized its significance. The range of the importance of the media was also accentuated by the activity of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications first established by Pope Pius XII as the Pontifical Commission for the Study and Ecclesiastical Evaluation of Films on Religious and Moral Subjects [13, 14].

Inter mirifica became an important message of the Church in the context of the growing significance of the media and this clearly showed that the era when the Church treated the media with a great dose of distrust and reserve is over. However, some of the French bishops criticized this decree, claiming that it lacks the theological contents. This criticism became quickly popular in the Western Europe, spreading later to the USA and Canada. Nonetheless, it had some positive effects, by creating conditions for discussion and forming opinions. This result was embodied by the pastoral instruction *Communio et progressio* (1971), including numerous theological elements relating to the theology of the communications and media [15]. It is believed to be of more theological and constructive character than the Vatican II decree since it expresses the above-mentioned criticism and is not limited to pastoral and ethical appreciation of the media, but it also creates the theological basis for the phenomenon of the communication, which is not limited to treating it just as a social and cultural issue [16].

As far as the allegations concerning the decree as being ‘non-theological’ are concerned, it must be remembered that the theology of the mass media did not, in fact, exist at that time. There were no methodological fundamentals allowing the Council to create it at least on a general basis. The Council Fathers also lacked the knowledge of the media – their functioning, effectiveness and nature, which would enable them to form the overall theological reflection on the phenomenon of the mass communication. Despite all this, the *Inter mirifica* decree may still be treated as the most important document concerning the topic of the media issued by the Church in the whole 20th century, because it completely changed the perspective of perceiving the media and it addressed three important issues: shaping the proper way to receive the media messages, applying moral standards while using and evaluating the media messages and protecting the youth against the negative effects of the media [4].

The instruction *Communio et progressio* is thought to deepen the Vatican II decree on the media, since it handles in greater detail many topics related to the current media issues. For instance, it was stressed that the mass media stand

for a providential gift from the God and they contribute to strengthening the brotherly friendship among the members of the human community. Such a positive assessment of the media resulted from their social character, i.e. receiving the messages by a large number of people. Therefore, building the community and contributing to its development was indicated to be the fundamental and goal of the mass media. Portraying the activity of the man in the context of the creative and redemptive work of God brought a theological perspective to the social communication means and showed their relation to Christ who is the perfect evangeliser. Vision of the media as tools of the God's Providence and the phenomenon of the communication treated as creating the community included a message and a postulate at the same time to make use of the media for the purpose of strengthening love, community, seeking the truth and human development.

The Vatican II appeal on teaching about the media was implemented through issuing the above-mentioned papal messages created on the occasion of each World Social Communications Day.

The messages of Pope Paul communicated in the years 1967–1978 touched upon different issues related to the subject of the media. Developing the Vatican II declaration included in the *Inter mirifica* decree and concerning the need for proper education on using the social communication means, Paul VI became a precursor of the media education [Paul VI, *Church and Social Communication: First World Communication Day. Message of the Holy Father Paul Vi for the World Social Communications Day*, 1967]. In his last message delivered in 1978, Paul VI expresses his concern about appropriate media education, which is still a valid pedagogical and pastoral postulate [Paul VI, *The receiver in Social Communications; his expectations, his rights, is duties. Message of the Holy Father Paul Vi for the World Social Communications Day*, 1978], repeated by the successive Popes – John Paul II, Benedict XVI and Francis [17].

The *Inter mirifica* decree inspired the Church to become more open towards the media and to treat them as the miraculous inventions, which resulted not only in developing the Catholic media doctrine and papal teaching on this subject included in the documents issued by the Holy See, but it also led to the proliferation of the new Catholic media – not only books and the press, but also the radio and television; later also – which was of great importance for the young generation the Church became present in the electronic media and virtual reality.

One can of course consider whether this document is still up-to-date after these 50 years, during which the world, the Church and the media have all changed. Nowadays we speak of the mediatized society, in which the media became an inseparable element of communication and expressing oneself – a conditionality of our existence in the world, in fact. Simultaneously, the way the Church is perceived, has changed, too. Although for many people the voice of the Church is still significant, it is frequently questioned and undermined. The Church, although used to top-down model of communication, it learns to listen.

Because of the plurality of forms of the communication channels the Church is not able to control them completely [K. Fanning, *Inter Mirifica and Communication in the Church*, https://www.academia.edu/23699199/Inter_Mirifica_and_Communication_in_the_Church, accessed 10.11.2018]. Despite this fact, she explores courageously more and more spheres of communication. The Pope has got a Twitter account, the web page of the Holy See is being modernized all the time, keeping up with the newest trends and technological inventions. Many applications support our spiritual life. The Bishops Conferences, dioceses and parishes try as best as possible to be present within the digital space, taking to heart and following the words of Pope Benedict XVI: „The world of communications involves the entire cultural, social and spiritual universe of the human person. If the new languages have an impact on the way of thinking and living, this in some way also concerns the world of faith and the understanding and expression of it. According to a classical definition theology means the understanding of faith and we know well that understanding, perceived as reflective and critical knowledge, is not alien to the cultural changes that are under way. The digital culture presents new challenges to our ability to speak and listen to a symbolic language that talks about transcendence.” [Address of His Holiness Benedict XVI to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Vatican, 28th February, 2011, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/speeches/2011/february/documents/hf_ben-xvi_spe_20110228_pccs.html, accessed 20.12.2018]

4. Conclusion

In the era of mediatisation the Church faces new challenges in the context of evangelization, trying to handle them all the time. However, despite the passage of time some of the thoughts included in the *Inter mirifica* decree are astonishingly valid. Notwithstanding the flow of time, this document has its place in the history as a specific breakthrough which set new trends and defined a new attitude of the Church towards the social communication means. Nowadays, the Church perceives the media not as evil, but as useful tools which may be effectively exploited in the process of proclaiming the Christ's Good News and illuminate the people's lives with the light of the Gospel.

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