

Social Communication

Vatican II and the Australian Church

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Abstract: *This article considers how the Catholic Church in Australia received and implemented the Second Vatican Council's Decree On The Media of Social Communications (Inter Mirifica). The article deals with the background to Inter Mirifica, its place within the Council's teaching, and the way it, and subsequent official teaching, address the massive development in social communications. In analysing how the Church in Australia received and implemented Inter Mirifica, it considers only four examples – Cinema, Media Education, Catholic Press and a National Office. There are some brief concluding comments on the digital age, and some of the future challenges the Church faces in using modern media.*

Key Words: Media; *Inter Mirifica*; Social Communications; Cinema; Catholic Press; Vatican II; Bishops Conference; Social Media; Digital Age.

Almost every Catholic has a view on the worth of the Catholic Press, the media image of Church leaders, the alleged anti-Catholic bias of some secular media organisations, the impact of television on children, and more recently, the impact of the internet and social media. Expectations are high and perspectives are varied and complex. The current article presents one perspective, particularly drawing on my experience as an official media spokesman for the Archdiocese of Sydney (1985 – 2002).¹

The article deals with the background to *Inter Mirifica*, its place within the Council's teaching, and the way it, and subsequent official teaching, address the massive development in social communications. In analysing how the Church in Australia received and implemented *Inter Mirifica*, it considers only four examples – Cinema, Media Education, Catholic Press and a National Office. Finally, there are some brief concluding comments on the digital age, and some of the future challenges the Church faces in using modern media.

THE BACKGROUND TO *INTER MIRIFICA*

The Church's mission is communicating the Gospel,² the account of God's self-communication and the revelation of the hope of salvation.³ The Church, Pope Benedict

¹ The views expressed in this article are personal and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference or any of the bishops or any other Church entity.

² *Inter Mirifica*, 3. [henceforth IM]

³ *Dei Verbum*, 2.

XVI has said, “is a community that hears and proclaims the word of God.”⁴ The Church has, through history, communicated the Gospel by preaching, letters, manuscripts and, in due course, publication of printed books. The first Secretary of the Congregation Propaganda Fidei, Francisco Ingoli, defended the use of a printing press to assist the Church’s missionary work.⁵

Prompted by the rapid development of the motion picture as mass entertainment, Pope Pius XI directed his encyclical letter, *Vigilanti Cura* (29 June 1936), at “a matter which touches intimately the moral and religious life of the entire Christian people.”⁶ The Holy Father acknowledged the good associated with the cinema “which might be of great advantage to learning and to education were they properly directed by healthy principles” and then referred to the potential for evil when they “often unfortunately serve as an incentive to evil passions and are subordinated to sordid gain”.⁷ This tension, that the modern means of social communication may be instruments for good or evil, becomes a recurring theme in Church teaching.

Vigilanti Cura proposed that each country establish an office to rate films and protect morals:

Therefore, it will be necessary that in each country the Bishops set up a permanent national reviewing office in order to be able to promote good motion pictures, classify the others, and bring this judgment to the knowledge of priests and faithful. It will be very proper to entrust this agency to the central organisation of Catholic Action which is dependent on the Bishops. At all events, it must be clearly laid down that this service of information, *in order to function organically and with efficiency, must be on a national basis and that it must be carried on by a single centre of responsibility.*⁸ [emphasis added]

Note, there is specific reference to a national office and a single centre of responsibility. The relationship between national and diocesan communications offices would become, and remains, an important but contentious issue for the Australian Church.

Faced with the rapid expansion of radio, and the new technology of television, Pope Pius XII continued and extended the teaching of *Vigilanti Cura* in his lengthy and detailed 1957 encyclical letter, *On Motion Pictures, Radio and Television (Miranda Prorsus)*.⁹ The Holy Father repeated the theme that new technology can bring about both good and evil:

These new possessions and new instruments which are within almost everyone's grasp, introduce a most powerful influence into men's minds, both because they can flood them with light, raise them to nobility, adorn them with beauty, and because they can disfigure them by dimming their lustre, dishonour them by a process of corruption,

⁴ Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Verbum Domini* 51, citing Benedict XVI, *Address to the International Congress “Sacred Scripture in the Life of the Church”* (16 September 2005): AAS 97 (2005), 956.

⁵ Franz-Josef Eilers SVD, *Communicating in Community: An Introduction to Social Communication* (Manila: Logos Publication, 1994), 55.

⁶ Encyclical Letter Of Pope Pius XI, *Vigilanti Cura* (1936) http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_29061936_vigilanti-cura_en.html

⁷ *Vigilanti Cura* citing *Divini illius Magistri* A.A.S., vol. XXII, 82 (1930); also http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xi/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_31121929_divini-illius-magistri_en.html

⁸ *Vigilanti Cura*.

⁹ See AAS, 16 December, 1954, XLVI (1964), 783-784.

and make them subject to uncontrolled passions, according as the subjects presented to the senses in these shows are praiseworthy or reprehensible.¹⁰

This encyclical letter displays a clear analysis and positive approach to the electronic media and was an important source document for the work of those responsible for the Vatican II Decree.¹¹

VATICAN II *INTER MIRIFICA*

The preparatory commission's original proposal for a document on social communication ran to 114 paragraphs but *Inter Mirifica* ended up a much shorter twenty four paragraphs, but with a promise of a future pastoral instruction.¹² John O'Malley SJ describes the discussion over three days, in the last two weeks of the first session, as "perfunctory and generally favourable".¹³ It was formally promulgated at the next session, 4 December, 1963, by a vote of 1,960 to 164.

The first part of *Inter Mirifica* deals with Church teaching on the moral order and the rights and responsibilities of those involved in the media of social communications. This includes the responsibility of the civic authorities to properly regulate the media, "lest grave damage befall public morals and the welfare of society through the base use of these media".¹⁴ The second part of the document is about the Church's role and pastoral use of the media.

The document had its early critics. Dr Stanley Stuber, the respondent in the Walter M Abbott SJ edition of the *Documents of Vatican II*, is critical of its failure to engage with the world. He cites a protest statement of some Catholic journalists sent to the Council on 16 November, 1963: "Where the document is not vague and banal, it reflects a hopelessly abstract view of the relationship of the Church and modern culture."¹⁵

One of Australia's most experienced and well regarded exponents of the media, Dr Michael Costigan, has described *Inter Mirifica* as "somewhat unsatisfactory but historic."¹⁶ It does not reflect the big issues of engagement with the world that emerged later in the Council's discussion on *Gaudium et Spes*. Stuber wonders if perhaps a different document may have emerged had it been debated much later in the Council.¹⁷

Inter Mirifica focuses inward and its tone of "watchful concern"¹⁸ is one of protecting the Church and the world from the threats posed by mass media. To the critics its

¹⁰ *Miranda Prorsus* at http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/pius_xii/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xii_enc_08091957_miranda-prorsus_en.html citing *Sermo ad cultores cinematographicae artis ex Italia Romae congregatos*, d. 21 Iunii, a. 1955: AAS, XLVII (1955), 504.

¹¹ Eilers, *Communicating in Community*, 201.

¹² IM 23. http://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_decree_19631204_inter-mirifica_en.html.

¹³ John W. O'Malley, *What Happened at Vatican II* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 2008), 152

¹⁴ IM 12.

¹⁵ Walter M Abbott SJ (ed) *The Documents of Vatican II* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1967), 332.

¹⁶ Michael Costigan, "The Media in General", *Australasian Catholic Record*, LXI/3 (1984): 259-264, at 261.

¹⁷ Stuber, in Abbott, *Documents*, 332.

¹⁸ IM 2.

“puritanical and restrictive language” suggests a form of “pre-Council isolationism”.¹⁹ There is an emphasis on control of the media rather than on their creative use and the development of material to assist the Church’s mission of evangelisation. However, it did give a mandate to the Church, clergy and laity, to join “without delay and with the greatest effort in a common work to make effective use of the media of social communication in various apostolic endeavours.”²⁰

In Australia there was already an extensive network of Catholic newspapers and magazines and the Church was well represented on Radio.²¹ The time was ripe for further engagement with the new possibilities. As will be discussed below the response of the local Church was mixed. There were success stories but many missed opportunities.

POST-CONCILIAR TEACHINGS

The website of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications²² has a comprehensive list of documents relevant to the Church’s teaching on social communications including the papal statements for the forty five annual World Communication Days.

The Pastoral Instruction, published on 23 May, 1971, *On the Means of Social Communication, (Communio et Progressio)* fulfilled the requirements of paragraph 23 of *Inter Mirifica*.²³ Its 187 paragraphs are comprehensive and positive in tone.

On 22 February, 1992, the Pontifical Council for Social Communications published a second Pastoral Instruction *On Social Communications On The Twentieth Anniversary Of Communio Et Progressio (Aetatis Novae)*. It took account of the rapidly developing digital world and developments socially, culturally, and politically since *Inter Mirifica* and *Communio et Progressio*.²⁴

In 2005 Pope John Paul II, published an Apostolic Letter, *The Rapid Development To Those Responsible for Communications*, affirming the importance of the mass media for the Church’s mission: “The use of the techniques and the technologies of contemporary communications is an integral part of its mission in the third millennium.”²⁵

For World Communication Day 2011, Pope Benedict XVI addressed the phenomena of the internet and social media:

¹⁹ Stuber, in Abbott, *Documents*, 333.

²⁰ IM 13.

²¹ Dr Leslie Rumble MSC hosted the legendary programme *Radio Replies* on Sydney’s Radio 2SM. The broadcast material was published in two volumes (1933 and 1952) and claimed a circulation of 4,000,000 worldwide. Among other notable contributors to radio were Fr Gerard Dowling in Melbourne on 3UZ and Fr Jim McLaren in Sydney on 2UW and 2SM, who set out his experience in the book *Stories in the Night* (Blackburn VIC: Collins Dove, 1987).

²² <http://www.pccs.va/>

²³ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html

²⁴ *Aetatis Novae 2* at http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_22021992_aetatis_en.html

²⁵ http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/john_paul_ii/apost_letters/documents/hf_jp-ii_apl_20050124_il-rapido-sviluppo_en.html at 2

The new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself, so much so that it could be said that we are living through a period of vast cultural transformation. This means of spreading information and knowledge is giving birth to a new way of learning and thinking, with unprecedented opportunities for establishing relationships and building fellowship.

New horizons are now open that were until recently unimaginable; they stir our wonder at the possibilities offered by these new media and, at the same time, urgently demand a serious reflection on the significance of communication in the digital age.²⁶

Against this background of the conciliar and post-conciliar teachings we can now consider how the Church in Australia has dealt with these challenges.

THE CHURCH IN AUSTRALIA AND *INTER MIRIFICA*

In assessing the response of the Church in Australia to *Inter Mirifica* it is convenient to consider, in turn, four areas of media activity – Cinema, Media Education, Catholic Press and a National Office.²⁷ They represent different perspectives and outcomes on what is an underlying theme – the tension between a national response and control at the diocesan level. They illustrate how outcomes were largely driven by the initiatives of a few enthusiastic individuals despite, on occasion, inaction and even opposition at an official level.

1. Cinema

As noted, *Vigilanti Cura* mandated a national office to give advice on motion pictures. The Minutes of the meeting of the Australian Hierarchy, on 16 November, 1936, state:

By his Encyclical, the Pope has made it imperative to deal with the censorship of films in an effective manner. The Committee should do all that the terms of the Encyclical required. Archbishop Mannix moved, Archbishop Prendiville, seconded that: “A committee consisting of Archbishop Sheehan, Bishop Barry, Bishop Gleeson and Bishop Norton be requested to undertake the work outlined in the memo of His Excellency the Apostolic Delegate for reducing to practice the dispositions made by the Holy Father regarding the Moving Picture Industry”. Carried unanimously.²⁸

There is no reference in Minutes of meetings in 1937, 1939, 1942 or 1944 to any further action being taken.

The Australian Hierarchy meeting in April 1954 rejected a resolution of the Conference of the Federal Council of Catholic Women suggesting an agency for promoting

²⁶ http://press.catholica.va/news_services/bulletin/news/26754.php?index=26754&lang=it#TRADUZIONE%20IN%20LINGUA%20INGLESE

²⁷ This selection of examples is not to discount the worth of the Church's contribution in other areas of mass media, such as book publishing (see Michael Goonan, “Catholic Book Publishing in Australia” *Australasian Catholic Record*, LXI/2 [1984]: 146-150, at 146), radio, or independent production facilities such as Albert Street Productions. *Mass for You at Home*, which after 37 years is one of Australia's longest running television programmes, is a real success story for the use of media. *Australasian Catholic Record* devoted two editions (April and July 1984) to articles on various aspects of the Media.

²⁸ ACBC Archives Minutes Meetings of Hierarchy of Australia (16.11.36), 31.

better films, similar to the American Legion of Decency, on the basis that “motion pictures were not made in Australia and it would not have scope here.”²⁹

Eventually in August 1970, the Australian Episcopal Conference, appointed Melbourne priest Fr Fred Chamberlin, as the Australian National Catholic Films Officer.³⁰ This was seen as a step towards a National Catholic Films Office. This Office began in 1975 with Fr Chamberlin as its Director, with approval to seek membership of the International Catholic Film Organisation (OCIC).³¹

This was not, however, where the apostolate began. Fr Chamberlin, a pioneer in the area of the film apostolate, had developed an enthusiasm and expertise in films going back to the 1940s. He cultivated close contacts with the very fledgling Australian film industry and built up a significant library of books and film magazines.³² His successor in this role Fr Peter Malone MSC explains the origins thus: “Fred tried from the late 40s to interest the bishops in a Catholic Film Office, even paying his own way to OCIC meetings from 1951 on. His correspondence re Australia is in the OCIC archives in Leuven.”³³

Fr Chamberlin held this role until his retirement in 1995 when the Bishops Committee for the Media deputed Bishop Hilton Deakin to undertake a review “to ascertain the feasibility of its continuance”.³⁴ Bishop Deakin’s review was positive and the Conference appointed Father Peter Malone MSC as Director and to represent the Bishops’ Committee for the Media at the annual OCIC meetings.³⁵ In April 1999 the Committee appointed the current Director, Fr Richard Leonard SJ.

Inter Mirifica dealt with films specifically³⁶ and gave practical suggestions for engagement with this industry by patronizing or jointly sponsoring theatres operated by Catholic and responsible managers³⁷, and through critical approval and awards. Taking up this challenge, the Australian Catholic Office for Film and Broadcasting, provides film reviews for all Catholic newspapers and magazines which wish to use them and it posts the reviews regularly on the Bishops Conference website and Facebook page.³⁸ In 2010 it

²⁹ ACBC Archives Minutes Meeting of Hierarchy of Australia 28 and 29 April 1954 item 22.

³⁰ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC August 1970 item 59.

³¹ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC May 1975 item 63.

³² His executor, Archbishop Denis Hart of Melbourne, gave his library to the Australian Catholic University.

³³ Email 13 January 2011 from Fr Peter Malone msc to Peter Thomas and copied to the author. An International Organisation relating to Catholic films, *Office Catholique Internationale du Cinema* (OCIC) was established in The Hague in 1928. It was a federation of National Catholic Offices of the Cinema.

³⁴ ACBC Archives (Media 15/2/1) correspondence 3 May 1995 Bishop Mayne to Bishop Deakin.

³⁵ ACBC Archives Minutes ACBC November/December 1985 item 78.

³⁶ IM 14; also see *Communio et Progressio* 142–147.

³⁷ The Genesian Theatre Company in Sydney had originated at a meeting on 15th August, 1944 of members of the Catholic Youth Organisation intent upon forming a full scale dramatic group; <http://www.genesiantheatre.com.au/index.php?mode=history>.

³⁸ The Office presently comprises Dr Richard Leonard SJ (Director), Rev Peter Malone MSC (Associate), Ms Jan Epstein (Associate) and Professor Peter Sheehan (Associate) and reports to the Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation.

reviewed 197 films. It promotes an annual Film of the Year award. In 2010 it named as the film of the year Claire McCarthy's *The Waiting City*.³⁹

At times, the work of the Office has sometimes generated controversy. For example, Fr Leonard's review of Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* stirred some indignation when he wrote:⁴⁰

True, we all see things reflected through our own personal values and cultural perspectives. But to this reviewer it seems very odd that a film dealing with a sentinel historical event about love, sacrifice, and redemption - for Christians 'the greatest story ever told' - can become in Gibson's hands so profoundly bleak, unremittingly punitive, and joyless.

Not only does the Office review films but it engages with other matters of media social policy on behalf of the Church. It prepared the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference submission to the 2009 discussion paper *Should the Australian National Classification Scheme include an R18+ classification category for computer games?* Members of the Office regularly engage with teachers in Catholic schools and have used the genre of film as part of priests' in-service in a number of dioceses.

The Church in Australia can rightly be proud of its achievements and its positive and enthusiastic response to *Inter Mirifica* in this area of media activity.

2. Media Education

Inter Mirifica recommended more training opportunities for media workers, "imbued with the Christian spirit, especially with respect to the social teaching of the Church."⁴¹ Training in the use of media should be available, "in Catholic schools at every level, in seminaries and in lay apostolate groups."⁴²

The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference published a major statement on Mass Media Education: *The Need for Mass Media Education* (August 1972), as a direct response to *Communio et Progressio*.⁴³ The statement drew on the pioneering work of Br Kelvin Canavan FMS in media education.⁴⁴ Over the years there were attempts to establish the

³⁹ Previous winners of the ACFO's Film of the Year include *Samson & Delilah*, *The Black Balloon*, *The Jammed*, *Ten Canoes*, *Look Both Ways*, *Tom White*, *Japanese Story*, *Rabbit Proof Fence*, *The Tracker*, *Beneath Clouds*, *Black and White*, *Australian Rules*, *Facing the Music* and *Looking for Alibrandi*.

⁴⁰ http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=303:the-passion-of-the-christ-fr-richard-leonard-sj&catid=57:film-reviews-2004&Itemid=21; see also *The Catholic Weekly* 14 April 2004. For a comprehensive survey of the controversy about the film see Mahlon H Smith, Rutgers University *Gibson Agonistes: Anatomy of a Neo-Manichean Vision of Jesus*, <http://virtualreligion.net/forum/passion.html>. For a different perspective see AD2000 April 2004 review by David Schuz. Cardinal George Pell wrote: "The film is a contemporary masterpiece, artistically and technically. It is not absurd to compare it with the paintings of the Italian master Caravaggio, because of its beauty and drama. It is more genuinely spiritual, even more violent but less erotic than Caravaggio's canvases." See *Zenit* 24 February 2004, available at <http://www.zenit.org/article-9480?l=english>.

⁴¹ IM 15.

⁴² IM 16.

⁴³ Published in *Australian Catholic Bishops Statements Since Vatican II*, Nicholas Kerr (ed.) (Sydney: St Paul Publications, 1986), 61.

⁴⁴ Br Kelvin Canavan fms "Mass Media Education: A New Subject for Schools", Unpublished M.S. thesis Cornell University, Ithaca, New York, 1974. Also "The Receiver in Social Communications: His Expectations, His Rights, His Duties" *L'Osservatore Romano* 18 May and 25 May, 1978. For an extensive list of Br Kelvin's publications

mass media curriculum but initial enthusiasm gradually waned. Teachers often lacked training and conviction about the importance of the subject. Separate media courses were squeezed by what seemed to be more pressing areas of curriculum. Fr Paul Duffy SJ, in his major study of the communications apostolate, outlined these and other reasons for what he described as “the widespread neglect of media education throughout the Catholic education system.”⁴⁵ With the development of social media there is now an even more pressing need for young people to understand the power of these media and their responsible use.⁴⁶

The bishops “strongly” recommended the establishment of “Mass Media Study Groups” in the various organisations of the Lay Apostolate, and requested that all Lay Apostolate Groups come together in a *united effort* (emphasis added).⁴⁷ As with school education, the idealism was evident but practical application lacking. One can only imagine how effective it might be if various groups pooled their resources towards implementing a coherent and well developed national media strategy. Parents were addressed quite specifically and again in very idealistic language:

Finally, but most importantly, we call upon all our Catholic parents, who are the primary and indispensable educators of their children, to assume their responsibilities in a most serious way as regards the reading, viewing, listening, formation of their families. Give your children your time and interest. Read, view, listen and discuss with them. Communicate with them. Educate them to a responsible, active, Christian approach to the mass media in all aspects, and help them to become articulate in expressing their informed judgements.⁴⁸

Later, following up the theme of World Communication Day 1979, the Bishops Conference issued a statement *Children and Television*.⁴⁹ It was just as exhortatory and idealistic:

Parents will help their children to gain much from television when they foster warmth, love and security in their family, when they develop in their children habits of critical discernment regarding television programmes – and, perhaps, more importantly teach them to restrict the time they devote to television viewing.⁵⁰

The 2006 Pastoral Letter of the Australian Bishops, *Go Tell Everyone* repeated the same themes and acknowledged that the bishops, over the years, had encouraged development of media education programmes exhorting teachers to prepare children to use the media responsibly.⁵¹ At the tertiary level The Australian Catholic University now offers formal training:

see http://www2.ceosyd.catholic.edu.au/cms/webdav/site/ceosydney/shared/About%20Us/BKCCV_Publications-September2010.pdf

⁴⁵ Fr Paul Duffy S.J. *To Bring the Good News – Evangelisation and Communications*, Report of the National Enquiry into the Communications Apostolate May 1967 (unpublished), 111.

⁴⁶ Pope Benedict XVI, Message for the 45th World Day of Social Communication 2011, “Young people in particular are experiencing this change in communication, with all the anxieties, challenges and creativity typical of those open with enthusiasm and curiosity to new experiences in life.”

⁴⁷ Kerr, *Australian Catholic Bishops Statements*, 64.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Children and Television* May 21, 1979, published in Kerr, *Australian Catholic Bishops Statements*, 65.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 67

⁵¹ http://www.catholic.org.au/index.php?option=com_docman&task=cat_view&gid=14&limit=5&limitstart=90&order=date&dir=ASC&Itemid=355

The Bachelor of Media Communication degree aims to enable students to understand and acquire the major competencies which characterise those who work in the fields of media and communication. The course focuses on the development of effective communication skills, including an understanding of the major ethical and institutional issues confronting media communicators through discourse on critical issues and trends in the discipline.⁵²

The bishops instructed “all Superiors of our Seminaries [to] introduce immediately an adequate course of training in the media of social communications, and that they single out students with particular talents in this field who will intelligently and humbly prepare themselves for this important field of the Church’s apostolate.”⁵³ The intentions were good but after the first few priests undertook post-graduate training in media little more was done.⁵⁴

The Congregation for Catholic Education published a *Guide to the Training of Future Priests Concerning the Instruments of Social Communications* on March 19, 1986.⁵⁵ It referred back to *Communio et Progressio*:

If students for the priesthood and religious in training wish to be part of modern life and also to be at all effective in their apostolate, they should know how the media work upon the fabric of society, and also the technique of their use. This knowledge should be an integral part of their ordinary education.⁵⁶

Nonetheless, seminary education in Australia in social communications, where it exists at all, is fragmented and *ad hoc*. Some diocesan communications offices have occasionally provided media training to clergy and others involved in various apostolates.

This is truly a missed opportunity and much more formal training should be available to equip future priests with the tools to deal with their local newspaper, to communicate effectively within their parishes or other ministries, and to use modern media for reaching the unchurched.

3. Catholic Press

The Catholic Press has a long history, beginning with the first issue of the *Australasian Chronicle* on 2 August 1839.⁵⁷ Now most dioceses in Australia have some form of print media and many religious institutes and other lay groups have their own magazines.⁵⁸

⁵² http://www.acu.edu.au/courses/undergraduate/media_communication/bachelor_of_media_communication/

⁵³ Kerr, *Australian Catholic Bishops Statements*, 64.

⁵⁴ Sydney priest, Dr William Alliprandi completed his doctoral studies through Cornell University with a thesis *God and Mammon – The Australian Church and Mass Media*. Other Sydney priests who undertook overseas study were Fr William Stevens and the late Fr. Desmond O’Neill. The late Fr Kevin Burton undertook practical training in television production locally.

⁵⁵ http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_19031986_guide-for-future-priests_en.html

⁵⁶ *Communio et Progressio*, 111.

⁵⁷ Ron F Robinson, “The Role of the Catholic Newspaper”, *Australasian Catholic Record*, LXI/2 (1984): 130-136, at 130.

⁵⁸ There are sixty five publications listed in the *Official Directory of the Catholic Church* 2010-2011 edition 750.

There are three weeklies,⁵⁹ one fortnightly⁶⁰ and the rest are monthly or quarterly. The Australian Catholic Press Association is active and holds an annual conference. Styles vary but the newspapers are generally limited to reporting local church events. Magazines from religious institutes, such as *The Majellan*, *Far East*, *Echo from Africa*, *Madonna*, *Eureka Street* (now an electronic journal), and *Marist Messenger* fill a great role in providing thought provoking, relevant articles of a spiritual, reflective or informative nature. *Australian Catholics*, published five times a year since 1993 by Jesuit Communications, and distributed free, is the largest magazine with an audited circulation of 196,555.⁶¹

Inter Mirifica encourages a Catholic press and sets out its purpose:

First, a good press should be fostered. To instil a fully Christian spirit into readers, a truly Catholic press should be set up and encouraged. Such a press – whether immediately fostered and directed by ecclesiastical authorities or by Catholic laymen – should be edited with the clear purpose of forming, supporting and advancing public opinion in accord with natural law and Catholic teaching and precepts. It should disseminate and properly explain news concerning the life of the Church.⁶²

The same principle applies to radio and television but there is little regard for the complexity and expense of what is proposed.⁶³ The aspirations expressed in *Inter Mirifica* do not reflect just how complex fostering “a truly Catholic press” can be. If the press is seen as merely the mouthpiece of the bishops there is a risk that it will be seen as uninteresting and not taken seriously. If a publication is “courageous”, encouraging wide ranging discussion, it risks conflict with ecclesial authority. Finding the right balance is a major challenge.

This problem is not new. In 1967 the Episcopal Conference resolved to advise the Catholic Press Association of the wish of the Conference that the press have a Catholic mind. In publishing items of news, disadvantageous to the Church, the press should defend the Church in justice and charity.⁶⁴ The Conference also resolved at this meeting to constitute Bishop Freeman deputy for the press and Bishop Muldoon deputy for Radio, TV and Films as a “Special Committee for Mass Media”.⁶⁵ In May 1968 Bishop Freeman reported that he had attended the Catholic Press Convention in June 1967:

... while expressing loyalty to the Hierarchy there was still much tension over the point of what should and should not be published in Catholic papers. Many elements had to be considered, there was pressure in the matter from several quarters. Circulation was declining in recent years. There was a repugnance to censorship among editors. They claimed that they were trying to develop a maturity in their readers, our Catholic papers just cannot ignore things printed in the daily newspaper.⁶⁶

Dr Costigan has explained how those involved with the Catholic press dealt with the direction in *Inter Mirifica*:

⁵⁹ The Catholic Weekly (Sydney), *The Catholic Leader* (Brisbane), *The Record* (Perth).

⁶⁰ *Kairos* (Melbourne)

⁶¹ <http://www.australiancatholics.com.au/content/view/11/11/>

⁶² IM 14.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1967 item 48.

⁶⁵ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1967 item 51.

⁶⁶ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 23 April – 1 May 1968 item 80.

We spent a good deal of time in those years examining the role of a Catholic newspaper and the implications for us of a principle which we regarded as firmly established of the community's right to information. In different ways we all experienced something of the tension that inevitably rose when the application of that principle appeared to be at odds with other widely accepted aims of the Catholic Press, including the need to sustain and nourish the faith and the religious commitment of our readers.⁶⁷

The right to information is explicitly affirmed in *Inter Mirifica*.⁶⁸ *Communio et Progressio* reaffirmed the "right to know" but in a nuanced and practical way it set out some limits relating to privacy and confidentiality.⁶⁹ It dealt with some of the issues that Dr Costigan had raised:

When the events of the day raise questions that touch fundamental Christian principles the Catholic press will try to interpret these in accordance with the Magisterium of the Church. Apart from this, clergy and laity will encourage a free expression of opinion and a wide variety of publications and points of view.⁷⁰

The tension for editors, in presenting the Church, and its leaders, "in a good light" and publishing even thoughtful and constructive criticism, is ever present, with the result that most diocesan newspapers have a limited readership of "the faithful". This is not to say that they are without worth. On the contrary, they are very valuable and deserve better support. Their great strength, as Ron Robinson said, is to be "the Church's historian"⁷¹ and a record of important events in the local scene.

4. National Office

A national media office was a long time coming. The story is one of uncertainty, delay and anxiety about expense. The process exemplifies the constant tension between the roles of national and local Church structures.

Inter Mirifica reiterated the requirement of *Vigilanti Cura* for a national office but expanded beyond cinema to include all media:

Since an effective apostolate on a national scale calls for unity of planning and resources, this sacred Synod decrees and orders that national offices for affairs of the press, films, radio and television be established everywhere and given every aid.In each country the direction of such offices should be entrusted to a special committee of Bishops, or to a single Bishop. Moreover, laymen who are experts in Catholic teaching and in these arts or techniques should have a role in these offices.⁷²

At a meeting of the Hierarchy on 8 May 1935 the bishops considered a report from the Committee which had met with respect to Catholic Action. It recommended the establishment of what was called the Bishops' Catholic Welfare Conference with five standing sub-committees, one being for Literature and Broadcasting to deal with the (a)

⁶⁷ Costigan "The Media in General", 261.

⁶⁸ IM 5.

⁶⁹ *Communio et Progressio*, 33, 42. http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/pontifical_councils/pccs/documents/rc_pc_pccs_doc_23051971_communio_en.html

⁷⁰ *Communio et Progressio*, 141.

⁷¹ Robinson, "The Role of the Catholic Newspaper", 130.

⁷² IM 21.

The Press, (b) Distribution of Literature, (c) Broadcasting, (d) Catholic Evidence Guild etc. The sub-committee comprised Archbishops Duhig and Sheehan and Bishop Farrelly.⁷³

In 1953 the Hierarchy rejected the idea of a central bureau for broadcasting proposed in a report by Rev C. H. Miller (Melbourne) which has been presented by the Committee for Education.⁷⁴ Bishop Lyons convened a Committee of Clergy that formed the National Catholic Committee for Radio and Television following a resolution at the meeting of bishops in April 1954.⁷⁵ It consisted of priests skilled in radio broadcasting named by the Metropolitans to prepare for the coming of television and to build up a reservoir of suitable and ample programmes for telecasting.⁷⁶ A meeting of the Australian Episcopal Conference in January 1961 resolved to form an Episcopal Committee for Radio, Television and Films. It specifically included films due to a recommendation from the National Catholic Rural Movement.⁷⁷ It was to oversee the National Catholic Committee for Radio and Television. The meeting of the Australian Episcopal Conference in January 1962 resolved to empower the Episcopal Committee for Radio, Television and Films to establish a National Catholic Radio and Television Centre.⁷⁸

It seems that it was not the mind of the bishops that this Centre would fulfil the expectations of *IM 21* quoted above. In fact, at their meeting in April 1965 the bishops explicitly rejected a proposal by the Catholic Press Association that, “a National Catholic Press Office be established as soon as possible to implement in Australia the provision of section 21 of the Vatican Council Decree of (sic) Mass Media.” The Minutes record that “Conference gave sympathetic consideration to the proposal but regretted that it was unable to undertake such a financial burden.”⁷⁹ On six further occasions the Conference considered a national office but did not proceed.

In August 1971, at the same meeting as the bishops decreed that *Communio et Progressio* be published and “widely distributed”, a motion “that the recommendation of the Catholic Press Association for the establishment of a National Catholic Press and Information Office be accepted by Conference” was defeated but with the decision to be reviewed in January 1972.⁸⁰ Again on numerous occasions through the 1970s and early 1980s the proposal was on the agenda but not considered “opportune”. Bishop Philip Kennedy, auxiliary bishop in Adelaide, was one who championed the cause but a major concern was expressed by the larger Archdioceses who did not want to “pay twice” for a national office which might be at the expense of their own diocesan communications works. A major report on the media apostolate by Fr Paul Duffy SJ gave the idea of a national office more impetus.⁸¹ This comprehensive study, running to one hundred and forty one pages with a detailed bibliography, surveyed all aspects of the Church’s media apostolate. The issues it raised in 1987 are still largely unresolved and few of its sixteen

⁷³ ACBC Archives Minutes Meetings of Hierarchy 1935 5.

⁷⁴ ACBC Archives Minutes Meetings of Hierarchy 1953 item 15.

⁷⁵ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1954 item 9.

⁷⁶ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1955 item 18.

⁷⁷ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1961 item 26.

⁷⁸ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1962 item 26.

⁷⁹ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC 1965 item 27.

⁸⁰ ACBC Archives Minutes AEC August 1971 items 54 & 56.

⁸¹ Fr Paul Duffy S.J., *To Bring the Good News – Evangelisation and Communications*, Recommendation 2

recommendations were ever taken up seriously. Eventually in 1989 Mary Newport was appointed as the first national media officer and she has been followed by Jackie Brady, Debra Vermeer and Beth Doherty.

One of the few areas of competence that the Second Vatican Council and later the *Code of Canon Law*, has given to Episcopal Conferences is the regulation of participation by clerics in radio and television.⁸² The Conference declined to make any regulations at the time it prepared its Complementary Norms following the promulgation of the new Code. In 1995 it again considered the matter and adopted the recommendation of Bishops Committee for the Media “not to establish a set of norms for clerics and religious to take part in radio and television programmes which concern Catholic doctrine or morals as such norms would be impossible to implement and would be interpreted by some as an unacceptable form of censorship”.⁸³

There is a Catholic Media Advisory Council to advise the Bishops Commission for Mission and Faith Formation on ways in which the Church might use the communications media, and to monitor and report to the Bishops Conference on significant developments. Managing media responses to major matters of public discussion at a national level is limited. When there are multiple voices acting without co-ordination the message is diluted, personalities are played against each other, and the public is left confused. The fundamental principle of effective public communication, especially for public policy advocacy, is one clear message.

The disparate nature of the media, the need for a local angle, and lack of discipline within the Church itself, inevitably means that any attempt at centralised control is inadvisable and unworkable. Co-ordination rather than control has to be the focus of any national office.

THE DIGITAL AGE

The pastoral letter, *Go Tell Everyone*, begins by acknowledging that “we live in an age where the media dominates almost every aspect of society.”⁸⁴ Digital communication is simple and inexpensive. Everyone can now be a publisher and information can be transmitted literally anywhere and instantaneously.

When I began as the official media spokesman, in Sydney in 1985, the fax machine was a novelty and desktop personal computers were a rarity. Urgent press releases were hand delivered to the offices of News Limited and Fairfax. Today the Bishops Conference media officer is fully at home with Internet, Facebook, LinkedIn, Twitter, Blogs, Blackberries, iPads, iPhones, digital camera, desktop audio and video editing, and all the latest in digital communication.

⁸² Can. 831 §2. “It is for the conference of bishops to establish norms concerning the requirements for clerics and members of religious institutes to take part on radio or television in dealing with questions of Catholic doctrine or morals.” Can. 772 §2. “In giving a radio or television talk on Christian doctrine, the prescripts established by the conference of bishops are to be observed.” See Congregation for Bishops *Directory on the Pastoral Ministry of Bishops (Apostolorum Successores)* (Libreria Editrice Vaticana 2004), 152.

⁸³ ACBC Archives Minutes Meeting Bishops Committee for Media, Kensington 28 April 1995.

⁸⁴ Pastoral Letter 2006, *Go Tell Everyone*, available www.catholic.org.au.

One popular analysis of the phenomenon of Facebook suggests “the world’s most popular networking site is the future” and the headline itself was challenging – “Email is so passé for the Facebook generation.”⁸⁵ Some commentators are more cautious: “Tweet this: social networking hasn’t won the battle yet.”⁸⁶

Anticipating developments and aware of the need for a sustainable presence in the digital age, Fr Michael Kelly SJ assisted the Bishops Conference to establish the Catholic Resources Trust in 1998.⁸⁷ His vision was that an entity that could aggregate the Church’s spending, especially in telecommunications, could use the surpluses generated from rebates and marketing fees to fund other media initiatives for the benefit of the whole Church. The main initiative, *Cathnews*, is a daily electronic clipping service emailed free to subscribers with links to main Catholic news stories, opinion pieces, website reviews and blogs. The 2010 annual report from Church Resources tells a remarkable success story that not only delivers Church entities many millions of dollars in savings but is a platform for a national outreach to and by the Church in digital communications. The full potential of this, and the recent development of Catholic Network Australia, is yet to be realised.

The Archdiocese of Sydney has invested in its own platform Xt3 which is explained in these terms:

Xt3 was created in response to one of Pope John Paul II’s WYD messages, “You young people have in a special way the task of witnessing today to the faith; the commitment to bring the Gospel of Christ - the Way, the Truth and the Life - into the third Christian Millennium, to build a new civilization - a civilization of love, of justice and of peace.” And so Xt3 represents Christ (Xt) in the 3rd Millennium.⁸⁸

Further, the Australian Catholic Bishops Conference has published a pastoral letter on the Internet for World Communications Day 2008 and in 2009 a Social Networking Protocol for the Catholic Church in Australia.⁸⁹

The future application of digital communication is unknown as is its potential for use by the Church. One hopes that the Church can keep pace with the rapid changes in this new media world.

SOME FUTURE CHALLENGES

The digital age has brought any number of new challenges but this article will briefly comment on just two – a clear “Catholic” voice and local media strategies.

⁸⁵ Article by Fran Foo, *The Australian* January 5 (2011), 9

⁸⁶ Article by Richard Glover, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, February 19 (2011) *Spectrum*, 5.

⁸⁷ The Catholic Resources Trust trades as Church Resources and is the publisher of *Cathnews*.
<http://www.Churchresources.com.au>

⁸⁸ <http://www.xt3.com/index.php>

⁸⁹ Available for download at www.catholic.org.au

1. What is “Catholic”?

John Allen Jr, the well-known and respected Vatican correspondent for the *National Catholic Reporter* comments:

In a media environment in which the inner dynamics of the Vatican are a black hole, virtually anybody can claim a connection and be taken seriously ... Not everything said or done in the Catholic Church is tantamount to a Vatican initiative. To think otherwise is to succumb to an excessively "purple" ecclesiology, in which everything about the Church begins and ends with its hierarchy, especially the Vatican.⁹⁰

A major challenge for the Church in Australia is to educate media practitioners about the hierarchy of Catholic authority. It is commonplace for the media to regard any statement by anyone associated with the Church, especially a cleric, as “official”. Headlines such as, “the Church said ...” are often nothing more than a private opinion of someone which may or may not be the opinion of others. This is made worse when there is little discipline among Church leaders to ensure that there is a consistent and coherent response to the issues of the day. The multiplicity of websites, blogs and electronic media, and the power of search engines, has meant there is little control on what might be picked up by secular media sources and regarded as “Catholic”.

Since Vatican II a number of media officers now work in the Church with most dioceses, agencies, education offices, hospitals having a media officer. It was quite a different picture even just 20 years ago. This indicates the Church in its many guises is taking media more seriously. What it does not mean, unfortunately, is that the Church speaks any more clearly or strategically.

Media are not limited by diocesan boundaries. Pius XI in 1935 saw the need for a national approach to cinema. The *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry for Bishops* acknowledges the competence of the Bishops Conference in the area of social communications.⁹¹ The rightful autonomy of the diocesan bishop is tempered by participation in the college of bishops.⁹² This is one area where bishops can work for the harmonisation of initiatives for “the good of the entire Christian community of the territory”.⁹³ Fr Duffy SJ expressed this still urgent but unresolved issue in these terms:

The greater effectiveness of its media work depends much on whether the Church decides on a national approach to co-ordinate and support the efforts of the local Church and to develop co-ordinated policy and action for a concentrated apostolic thrust; or whether it allows much of the value of local efforts to be lost to the wider Church and wider society because of a fragmented approach to the use of these efforts.⁹⁴

⁹⁰ *National Catholic Reporter* 14 January (2010), <http://ncronline.org/blogs/all-things-catholic/warning-labels-vatican-stories-especially-exorcism>.

⁹¹ Congregation for Bishops *Directory for the Pastoral Ministry for Bishops*, 43.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 21.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁹⁴ Duffy, *To Bring the Good News*, paragraph 15.10, 135.

2. Local media

There is a tendency to assume that the only media that matter are the main metropolitan daily newspapers and the capital city radio and television. There is a vast network of local newspapers and regional radio and television stations. These are hungry for local news. The Church is present in all their communities.

Through a lack of awareness, and some degree of timidity, Catholic parishes are much more reluctant than their evangelical counterparts to engage with the media. The Australian Catholic Bishops Conference published and sent to every parish a *Parish Media Kit*⁹⁵ to encourage and assist parishes engage with their local media and use communication to build the parish.⁹⁶ It has not had much traction. Yet there is an opportunity through use of local media to strengthen the faith of the committed and arouse curiosity in those on the margins. This can be combined with use of digital media, parish webpages, Facebook accounts and email communication within the parish to improve the effectiveness of the mission of evangelisation. Just as parish finance councils have made a huge contribution to better fiscal management in parishes, so too a parish communications committee could assist in using opportunities the media present.

CONCLUSION

This has been a somewhat selective overview of how the Church in Australia has responded to *Inter Mirifica*. Much more could be written, and Fr Duffy's 1987 national enquiry provides ample material that could profitably be revisited.

The voice of the Church on matters of social policy, as seen and heard through the media, is confused. There are too many voices saying too many different things. Australian Catholics and the wider community deserve a clearer sense of what is truly an authentic Catholic position on the issues of the day. A co-ordinated strategy would emphasise a national response to national issues, the metropolitan archbishops dealing with state issues, and the local bishops dealing with local issues while reinforcing for their local media the state or national comments. Specialist Church agencies in health, welfare and education would deal with practical issues in their areas of competence.

With respect to matters internal to the Church, bishops should be able to draw on common resources, rather than each one feeling the burden of "reinventing the wheel". Church leaders need to acknowledge that an educated laity will want to express opinions. Rather than stifle dissent, it is better to counter it with solid teaching, explaining effectively, including through the media, essential matters of faith and morals.

A more concerted effort at media education in seminaries, at ongoing formation gatherings of clergy, is necessary if the potential presented by the new media is to be realised. This can draw on the expertise and experience of the laity. The good news deserves to be well told.

⁹⁵ Available for download on www.catholic.org.au.

⁹⁶ Brian Lucas, "Building Parish Communities Through better Communication", *Australasian Catholic Record*, 81/4 (2004): 410-430, at 410

Inter Mirifica concluded with this comment which points the way for the future:
... like salt and light, [the media] will give savour to the earth and brighten the world. Moreover, the Synod invites all men of good will, especially those who have charge of these media, to strive to turn them solely to the good of society, whose fate depends more and more on their proper use.⁹⁷

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⁹⁷ IM 25.