

# The Social Communications and Theology Project (SCTP)

## A Brief Introduction

The Social Communications and Theology Project (SCTP) had its beginning at the Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Communications (CICS) in 1983 when the first conference on theology and communications was organized at Cavaletti, on the outskirts of Rome. The continuing conferences addressed the importance of associating theological studies with communication studies, focussing especially on developing a communicative theology in the context of popular culture and popular religion. The project continues to look at areas like communicative elements in theology, theology of communications, communication theology, communicative theology, Bible and communication, ecclesiology and communication, culture and communication, moral theology and media interpretations of Christian values etc. The project hopes that a more contextualized theological studies that look at our mediated reality can help professional theologians and theological students make their studies contribute to their goal of the Kingdom of God in this world.

Theologians often seem to be on their own wavelength, continuing with their own teachings content and methods, unmindful of what is happening globally in a thoroughly mediated culture. Communicators often wonder whether they have any interest in the new cultures spawned by the media. Future priests, religious and laity receive a large amount of theoretical input in theology, in abstract doses, which often fail to connect to reality.

On the other hand, communicators have made attempts to use the media, following an instrumental aspect without a proper theology that explains why media usage is important. Hence it is important to develop a vision for communication and media education within the Church. It seems unless theologians wake up to the media and their impact on ministry, communications may remain an outsider in the Church.

The Social Communications and Theology Project (SCTP) proposes to have an on-going dialogue between theology and communications all over the world

## Some Terms Explained.

**Theological Reflection** or **theologising** to some, began to be talked about from the early 1970s. This is an attempt at trying to find the meaning of everyday events in the light of faith. i.e. interpreting Scripture and doctrines in the light of human experience and explaining human experience in the light of Scripture and Tradition (Faith). Its primary presupposition is that God is active and present in history and is always involved in the various events of the day. Hence history can be seen as events shaped through God's intervention (Word event). Theologising thus is the continuous dialogue and interaction between the gospel or the Christian message and the realities of today. The gospel or Christian faith puts questions to the actual situation and, on the other hand, the present realities put questions of faith so that the faith itself may be re-interpreted. The content of Christian faith needs continuous interpretation and reinterpretation so that it may become understandable and relevant for the people of today. Such interpretation is needed both to distinguish between the core of the message and its historical cultural expressions, and also to safeguard the authentic faith against its historic distortions.

**Theology of communication** tries to make a theology about communication, its science and process – like in a theology of education, of health, of the environment etc. Trying to make a

theology of communication is almost like trying to “baptize” communication, often seen as a secular subject by the Church, and give it a Christian identity so that Church leaders can respond to it better. Theologians may show less interest in this area, the communicators would try inventing this.

**Communication theology** is understanding, reinterpreting or re-expressing the categories of communication into the very process of theologising; something like St. Thomas using Aristotle, or Rahner referring to transcendental philosophy. Here we try to say that theology is all about communication. It is more a methodological approach to redefine theology. Theological subjects like Trinity, Revelation, Sacraments, Missiology, Ecclesiology, Christology, Catechetics, Liturgy, etc have strong communication dimensions. These can be linked to communication and taught from that perspective.

Again theology may be interpreted as the communication of communication, because, the content of theology is the communication of God, the Father to humans through his son Jesus who become man, and theology is actually an attempt the communicating that communication (the faith) to the people.

**Communicative theology** is studying theology from the perspective of communicating it. Often theology is studied as abstract concepts. Here we talk of Theology being made practical and experienced by ordinary people. Media language demands that abstract subjects like theology and philosophy be made concrete, image-based, sensorial and experiential. For example, when one adapts teaching methods like group discussion, debates, role plays, or employs other audiovisual aids or uses vocabularies that are sensible to modern people to explain theological concepts, it is communicative theology. This can be said to be a kind of inculturation of theology.

## **Background**

For the last 27 years, the Interdisciplinary Centre for Social Communications (CICS) at the Pontifical Gregorian University (PUG), Rome, has been offering an interdisciplinary communications studies programme. Some professors at the CICS with a team of international theologians and communicators seek to develop links between the disciplines of theology and communications. The eight very enriching Cavalletti Conferences, held on the outskirts of Rome from 1981, have resulted in some theology professors thinking about the interplay between theology and communications. Subsequent conferences in different parts of the world have spurred the publication of a number of books that throw significant light on the various relations between theology and communications.

## **The SCTP Conferences**

The continuing conferences are normally of a small number of people with each one contributing a paper in order to study an area thoroughly. Areas covered include: the foundational relationship between theology and communications, contextual theology, popular culture, new media, communications and culture. Unless this relationship with theology, communications and popular culture is firmly established, the Church's involvement in communication and media can remain peripheral and even superficial. As new theology and communications professors emerge, profoundly trained in their disciplines, they run the risk of missing the link between the two disciplines. Hence the need to continuously contribute to the on-going debate on the inter-relations and interaction between these two disciplines by hosting a conference for additional people every 2-3 years and carefully documenting them for future references.

## The Conference Themes

The major themes for these conferences approach the relationship between theology and communication in diverse ways. The first, *Communication Inside, Communication Outside - from the Centre to Periphery*, takes up the twin themes of ecclesiology and evangelization: communication ad intra or within the Church and communication ad extra or outside the Church. In today's contexts, communication media and technologies heavily influence both of these movements. One could debate (and we should) whether these media serve this dual mission well or whether interpersonal communication would better serve the basic functions of organizational communication and evangelization.

The second recurrent theme, *Theology and Communications*, describes the central issues of these conferences. It also introduces the work of theologians who have incorporated the fruits of communication research into their work and those communication scholars who examine theology or the religious uses of communication media. Without dialogue, these approaches carry the very real risks of people outside their areas of expertise making claims that more serious research does not support. Sadly, much wishful thinking characterizes work on both sides of the theology and communications divide. The Cavalletti approach attempts to minimize these difficulties through academic dialogue and partnership.

*Communication in Formation*, another favourite theme, returns to one of the initial motivations for the Cavalletti conferences: How should the Church prepare future ministers in terms of communication in the contemporary world? Clearly, communication forms a central part of any ministry in the Church. What roles should rhetoric, interpersonal communication, and media studies play in the formation of clergy and other ministers? Vatican II and the Pontifical Council for Social Communication asked for serious study of the issue, as have the Vatican Congregation for Seminaries and various national conferences of bishops. The Cavalletti approach points to preparing materials – books on fundamental theology, ecclesiology, moral theology, for example, – which can enrich existing seminary courses without adding extra courses to an already crowded set of requirements.

Participants agree about the importance of doing a *Contextual Theology* rather than an abstract, universalized version that ignores culture. The cultural context in which one theologizes is a point of intersection between theology and communication since the latter both expresses and creates cultures.

Communication's main point of intersection with theology comes in the area of pastoral theology. Cinema and media literacy courses have long been used in training people for ministry. Hence the conferences highlight the need for a communication sensitivity and competency that includes critical self-reflection, an imaginative appreciation of culture, an appreciation of cultural richness in diverse groups, and an ability to integrate one's own story into the larger context.

Communication experts can learn from theology and apply a type of theological reflection about communication phenomena. Some professors have already developed methods of using theological models to organize the program of communication studies. There is a great need to analyze the theoretical implications and cultural consequences of new forms of communication, the new digital media. A broad historical perspective is important since previous stages of communication (orality and literacy) do not disappear, but coincide with and overlap the new modes of communication. The group raises more questions than it can answer about the impact new media developments will have on faith and culture. The revolutionary change that one can see in young students points to a huge

impact that needs to be understood so that the Church can adequately respond in an effective pastoral manner.

### **Previous Conferences**

From 1983 to 1997, there have been eight Cavalletti conferences, as well as two Cavalletti-like conferences in the United States each focused on aspects of the theology and communication conversation.

1983 Cavalletti I: *Theology and communication: general approaches*.

1984 Cavalletti II: *Fundamental theology and communication*. How might communication study and research inform the basic grounding of theology? What kinds of basic questions for theology could communication address?

1985 Cavalletti III: *Philosophy and Communication*. Objectives: to examine various approaches to communication philosophy (philosophy of language, explorations of meaning) as a foundation for seminary courses attuned to the role of communication.

1988 Cavalletti IV: *Moral theology and communication*. Does the world of the media have an impact on moral theology? How might moral theologians take advantage of media products or of the work of communication scholars.

1989 Cavalletti V: *Ecclesiology and communication*. What might communication study teach us about the organizational structure of the Church? More specifically, participants were to “focus on current developments in ecclesiology and the significance of new conceptions and new cultural patterns of communication for ecclesiology and for the life of the Church” (Granfield, 1994, p. v)

1991 Cavalletti VI: *Foundations for a Theology of Communication*. Objectives for the conference: (1) work toward a systematic synthesis regarding the theology of communication using Nos. 1-18 of *Communio et Progressio* as a point of departure; (2) prepare a book presenting some of the major themes of a theology of communication and a commentary on that theology; (3) exchange ideas on teaching communication and theology.

1993 Cavalletti VII: *The New Image of Religious Film*. How does film contribute to religious meaning? What historical trends appear in the use of religious themes in the cinema? Can theology contribute to film criticism? This conference brought together members of the International Catholic Organization for the Cinema (OCIC) and theologians.

1997 Castel Gondolfo VIII: *Media, religion, and popular culture*. How does popular culture express religious images, themes, and sensibilities? [Meanwhile the Jesuits had sold Villa Cavalletti, and so the conference was held at another retreat centre located across the lake from Castel Gondolfo.]

2007 Ariccia IX: *Rethinking theology and ministry in the light of today's developments in communications*. A summary conference which considered most of the major issues.

### **Other Locations**

1988a Marquette University Conference: *Moral theology and communications*. This follow-up conference addressed the similar themes, bringing together additional scholars.

1988b Santa Clara University Conference: *Communication in the U.S. Church*. This conference approached the communication, theology, and culture questions from the perspective of the Church in the United States. The conference originated as a way to reproduce the fruits of the Cavalletti conferences in other locations.

2003 Ruhalya Theological College, Ujjain, India: *National Conference on n theology and communication*.

2005 St. Peter's Pontifical Seminary Bangalore, India: *National Conference on Mission and Communication*.

(PS. There are many other seminars organized elsewhere inspired by the Cavaletti initiatives, but we do not have a record of them)

### **Books from the previous conferences**

1988a Marquette University Conference. Rossi, P. & Soukup, P. A. (Eds.). (1994). *Mass Media and the Moral Imagination*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed and Ward.

1988b Santa Clara University Conference. Soukup, P. A. (Ed.). (1996). *Media, Culture, and Catholicism*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward.

1989 Cavalletti V. Granfield, P. (Ed.). (1994). *The Church and Communication*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward.

1993 Cavalletti VII. May, J. R. (Ed.). (1997). *New Image of Religious Film*. Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward.

2004 Ujjain, India. *Towards a Communication Theology*, (ed. Jose Palakeel) Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore.

2007 Ujjain, India, *The Bible and the Technologies of the Word*, (Ed. Jose Palakeel) Asian Trading Corporation, Bangalore.

2007 Ariccia IX: Srampickal Jacob, Mazza Giuseppe, Soukup Paul (eds): *Theology and Ministry in a Technological Age:r Rethinking theology and ministry in the light of today's developments in communications*. (in preparation)

### **For more Information**

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