

Communication and integral ecology in the encyclical *Laudato si'*

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(from the Alphonsian Academy blog)

The references of the encyclical *Laudato si'*[1] to the Means of Social Communication (MSC) are contained in the fourth part of the first chapter (43-47), entitled “Decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society.” In this chapter, *LS* considers the negative effects of the current model of development (43), which promotes chaotic and unhealthy cities (44), privatizes beautiful spaces, reserving them for the rich (45), increases inequalities, breaks the bonds of social cohesion, and generates violence (46). Among all these challenges, the encyclical points out the influence of the *MSC* (47).

A critical view of the *MSC* is evident here. They respond to the commercial interests of the multinationals that control them and promote the same capitalist model of development that has caused the current socio-environmental crisis. This critical approach to the *MSC* contrasts with the optimism of a UN document,^[2] which affirms that “the guarantee of diffusion and access to information sources seems to be sufficient in itself for the promotion of a healthy sustainable development” ^[3] for the coming years.

Laudato Si', instead, affirms that the *MSC* can manipulate human perception, especially when they “become omnipresent” and when relationships with others are “replaced by a type of internet communication” (47).

1. Mental and media pollution

Laudato Si' affirms that “true wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue, and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data, which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution” (47). Indeed, an overload of data can prevent us from structuring our thinking and an excessive amount of information can create confusion instead of increasing our knowledge.

Information should bring us to knowledge and wisdom, but often the *MSC* use it as an end in itself. “Amid the noise and distractions of an information overload” (47), we are given countless answers, but we are unable to formulate the right questions.

Instant communication makes it difficult to process our experiences inwardly and to assimilate them thoughtfully. Thus, it is difficult to learn “how to live wisely, to think deeply, and to love generously” (47). In fact, the media environment is increasingly polluted and could become unbreathable, due to manipulation and lack of transparency.

2. The media facilitate (and shape) our relationships

The encyclical *Laudato Si'* affirms that the risks associated with the *MSC* become more challenging when real relationships are replaced “by a type of internet communication” (47). Virtual communication “enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim” (47), thus hindering the construction of our own identity and the serene encounter with others. “In a culture often dominated by technology, sadness and loneliness appear to be on the rise.”^[4] It is also growing “a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations” (47).

“Today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections” (47). It is therefore paradoxical that their most frequent users tend to be the less empathetic ones. This confirms that technology facilitates virtual contact, but cannot guarantee empathy, which belongs to the anthropological dimension of communication. Indeed, “when we allow ourselves to be caught up in superficial information, instant communication, and virtual reality, we can waste precious time and become indifferent to the suffering flesh of our brothers and sisters.”^[5] Quite often, the relationships established on social networks remain superficial and inconsistent, without any commitment or responsibility.

Laudato Si' warns about the dangers of a communication that often gives rise “to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature” (47).

3. Far from nature, far from the poor

The “rapidification” (18) of the current technological society drives us to frenetic activity, to global indifference, and to ride rough-shod over everything around us (225). The same media that facilitate virtual contact, can also “shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others, and the complexity of their personal experiences.” (47) In this way, we lose empathy, solidarity, and capacity to contemplate creation.

Being physically removed from the reality they describe, some professionals fall into a “green” rhetoric, which is clearly fragmented and insensitive to the suffering of the poor. Instead, “a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach” (49), because everything is connected. Actually, “a crime against the natural world is a sin against ourselves and a sin against God” (8).

Conclusion

The media and the digital world respond to the commercial logic of the multinationals that control them and, therefore, present ethical challenges. In any case, the real dilemma does not consist in deciding whether to use the MSC or not, but rather in using them responsibly.

The MSC offer enormous potentialities to communicate “knowledge and affections;” therefore, “efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches.” (47)

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[1] The quotations of the encyclical *Laudato Si'* will be indicated with just the numbers in parentheses. The reader will find this topic further developed in: M. Carbajo Núñez, “*Tutto è collegato*”. *Ecologia integrale e comunicazione nell'era digitale*, EDI, Napoli 2020.

[2] United Nations, [=UN] «Transforming our world. The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,» in *Internet*: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>. [Last visit: Sept. 27, 2018]

[3] F. Colombo, «MSC and information in the *Laudato si'*,» in *Educatio Catholica* 4 (2017) 41-49, here 49.

[4] Francis, «Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et misera*,» Nov. 20, 2016, n. 3, in *AAS* 108 (2016) 1311-1327.

[5] Francis, «Apostolic Exhortation *Gaudete et Exsultate*,» [GE]March 19, 2018, LEV, Vatican City 2018, n. 108.