

Credible Christian Communication Today

Two preliminary remarks, before I begin properly.

First, Virginia Woolf, writing to her sister, Vanessa Bell, lamented T.S. Eliot's becoming an Anglo-Catholic: "Tom may be called dead to us all from this moment forward. He has become an Anglo-Catholic, believes in God and immortality, and goes to church. I was really shocked. A corpse would seem to me more credible than he is. I mean, there's something obscene in a living person sitting by the fire and believing in God."ⁱ This was in 1927 – and probably a minority view at the time. But almost a century later this view would be much more common – namely that Christians are odd, strange, disconcerting people to many in our society. We need to bear that in mind.

Second, you may naturally shy away from the idea that God has a part for you to play in sharing His word with others. There is nothing special about me, you may think; I am just an ordinary person. But God has a knack of using ordinary people to accomplish God's extraordinary purposes. God's approach to influencing the world is through us. Every follower of Jesus can be inspired, instructed and mobilized to influence the world from right where they are. In fact, it is ordinary, everyday believers – not just professional Christians such as priests, church leaders, professed religious, or authors and theologians – who are specially tasked by Jesus himself to bring God's influence to the world. We are all his agents of change, whether our lives touch one person or a thousand.

1. The **influence** a Christian exerts on us happens through three things coming together:

First, that person's qualities and way of living – something in them we find compelling, admirable, inspiring and attractive. We want a bit of what they have; we want to reflect some of their way of being. They serve as a model for us. It feels important for us to take on board some of their qualities; it feels both worthwhile to do so and, to an extent at least, possible to strive to display something similar in our lives.

Second, our own situation, history, context and experience; our particular hopes and fears; our own opportunities and the challenges we face in life; the things that matter to us. For a person's influence on us to be deep and enduring, there needs to be some connection, some kind of fit, between what they display and what we find ourselves facing.

Third, much less obvious or visible to us is the way God's Holy Spirit touches our lives; the way God calls us through others. God's timetable is so different from ours. God's touch can be so light and God's whispers can be so quiet that we can miss them or fail to realise that they are happening, often through the agency and example of someone else. There is something essentially mysterious about how God works on us through the witness and example of other people. Despite the value of psychological and sociological explanations of why we think like we do – and we should be willing to learn from such social sciences – nevertheless, what we cannot map or give an adequate account of is the how light from sacred scripture changes our perception, how grace modifies our behaviour, how the Holy Spirit operates within us.

I very much doubt if we can accurately identify or recall all those who have deeply influenced us. And I very much doubt that we appreciate how much influence we have on others (for better and for worse). I guess we would be both shocked and also gratified if we really knew the influence we have had on other people, just as they would be sometimes shocked and sometimes pleased to know their influence on us.

Think of someone who has helped you feel closer to, more attracted to or more committed to Christian faith. What was it about them that had this effect? Don't name them but can you briefly share one or more of the qualities they showed.

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I think credible spiritual communicators show some of the following qualities. There is a resonance between the words used and the person uttering them. Interiority – an inner life – is evident. Integrity shines forth from them. They are self-possessed and not striving too hard for our approval. They are unostentatious. They are committed to – and embody or model - the principles they espouse. They trust the truth (that they have embraced) to have its own power. I very much like something that Carl Rogers once wrote: ‘What is most personal and unique in each of us is probably the very element which would, if it were shared and expressed, speak most deeply to others.’ Credible communicators are unafraid to share their real self while many of us might seek to protect and hide our inner self.

Credibility requires a combination of personal commitment and courage, patience, humility and restraint, sensitivity to and compassion for others, finding the right tone of voice, a willingness to give space to others and a confident trust in the mysterious operation of grace. Such a person encounters others not as someone they can use, change, fix, help, save, enrol, convince or control. They see the person standing in front of them as precious, as unique, as someone whose heart holds things for which there is no language, whose life is an unsolved mystery, as someone who has their own story from which something valuable can be learned. We can't be a blessing to others if we don't respect their uniqueness, if we don't allow them to uncover who they are, rather than shaping them into what we want or need them to be. We cannot strengthen someone and violate their integrity at the same time. In each person we meet, the hidden God waits to surprise us into noticing some aspect of His glory. Above all, those who wish to be credible should demonstrate that the truth they hope to convey is being realized in their own life in ways that are transformative and positive. “The best way to bring someone to love Christianity is to incarnate it in ourselves.” i.e. to embody it, to give it flesh and blood through our actions. Credibility rests heavily on personal example and integrity and congruence between a message and a life. “The transformation of believers is the preliminary and absolute condition for the conversion of unbelievers.”

2. Our history of communicating faith

For hundreds of years Christian faith was transmitted without benefit of schools, universities or seminaries. With only the most rudimentary parish structures, before catechisms were drawn up, and while most people could neither read nor write, somehow the language and practice of faith has been learned and has been passed on. Under pressure of persecution and in the midst of war, terror, torture, disease and death, as well in the face of indifference and rejection, new Christians have been formed, tested, and grown to maturity as disciples. From the very beginning Christians argued about what should be included in sacred scripture, about the central elements of doctrine, about how worship should be celebrated and about how authority should be exercised. Despite constant temptation, backsliding, scandal and sinful shortcoming, displayed by Christians at every level of learning and status within the church, and throughout every century of its history, somehow the faith did not die. Thus, faith was learned and flourished not because of the provision of what might seem to be the necessary supporting structures and institutions, resources and curriculum, nor because Christians enjoyed agreement, safety, stability, or a congenial environment. How was this possible?

Before, during and after all the work of the church, whether by this we refer to the reading of sacred scripture, the passing on of tradition, the work of theologians, the judgements of the magisterium, the exercise of reason, the practice of preaching, the faithful engagement in prayer, the care for the poor, the part played by retreats, pilgrimages and spiritual directors, by shrines and relics, by icons and religious art in all its forms – underlying all this we believe is the Holy Spirit in operation. The Spirit of God elicits and encourages, challenges and comforts, strengthens and blesses, inspires and illuminates, heals and sustains the faithful, so that they do not go under in the face of disappointment and difficulty, of darkness, despair or defeat. We believe that we are held in the loving arms of God, that God reaches out to us from across eternity, to embrace us and that our responses are prompted by God’s Spirit, rather than simply by our own efforts, that in trying to explain our faith in our limited and inadequate, stuttering and stammering attempts, the spirit of God is working both from within us and through all those we meet. Prior, then, to every act of evangelisation and catechesis, of preaching, and teaching, of prayer and service, God is already at work, arousing us from our slumbers, directing our attention, stimulating our efforts, picking us up when we fall and loving us throughout, regardless of our apparent success or failure.

Once we have properly conceded to God’s Holy Spirit the primacy, in time and importance, of initiative, of action and of efficacy, then we can acknowledge the importance of personal influence, of lives touching lives, of example showing us the way. When people who matter to us - whether these be family or friends, or people we have come to trust and respect, who we feel care for us, but who also care about what is true and good – when such people seem to live by and from faith, we feel its pull, its attraction, its power. We feel invited to follow. Over the centuries the saints have been the most effective ambassadors for the credibility and the appeal of Christian faith, the most influential mediators of God’s loving presence and God’s invitation to share the divine life.

3. Pope Francis and synodality

Now let me link my interest in communication to how **Pope Francis** has given a real boost to the ancient practice of holding synods. A **synodal church** is one in which the baptised walk together on their pilgrim journey, listening to the Holy Spirit and to each other, as they try to discern how God wants them to carry out their mission in the world. A synodal church invests heavily in listening and it takes seriously the insights gained from people’s experiences of life and of trying to live Christianly. And this chimes with something that the Australian Jesuit Richard Leonard wrote a few weeks ago about Pentecost in *The Tablet* (11/06/22, p.6). He wrote: ‘For too long we have said that the most public gift on display at the first Pentecost was the gift of tongues, But a careful reading of the text reveals that the gift received was the one of hearing and listening. Rather than the gift of tongues, at Pentecost the first followers of Jesus received the gift of ears.’ And in previous talks I have given to church groups, I have often said that what we need is not a more powerful microphone or megaphone with which to broadcast our faith but a more sensitive hearing aid. People are much more likely to engage with us positively if we show that we are really listening to them and that they really matter to us than if we rely on any theological erudition or acumen we might have. We need to be aware of two crucial points about people: first, they don’t care what we know until they know that we care; second, if we wish to be heard and if we want people to learn from us, then we must be ready to listen to and learn from them; communication should not be unilateral – it should be reciprocal.

The emphasis that Pope Francis has put on synodality - as the path towards a healthier Church – is closely connected to other major themes of his pontificate, for example, mercy, closeness

to the people, discernment, accompaniment, hospitality towards migrants, dialogue with people of other cultures and religions, and joy in responding to and sharing the Gospel.

4. This moment

In many respects we face a world similar to that of the early centuries of the Church - a world that is no longer formed by Christian beliefs, virtues and practices; a world where an old order has collapsed, a world of pluralism, syncretism, and of materialism; a world of political turbulence, economic instability, massive migration, even of plagues like the Covid pandemic. But we should not panic, nor should we despair. The French Catholic philosopher, Chantal Delsolⁱⁱⁱ tells us that the end of Christian civilization is not the end of the world. What is happening now is a return to the pagan world experienced by the early church. She says that the Christian era worked by domination of the world. But today Christians must find another way of being in the world. This is to be a simple witness, a secret agent for God.

Our moment is one of a **diaspora Catholicism** - Cf Judaism since fall of Masada (74AD); as it was in the days of the early Church; as it was again after the Reformation. A diaspora Catholicism lacks the strong institutional structures that upheld, even imposed the faith. A diaspora Catholicism is more dispersed, looser, less systemic, more informal, more co-responsible & participative, a more flexible experience of faith life. A diaspora Church means less centralisation, less reliance on structure, greater flexibility, deeper connection to the roots of our faith, much greater inclusivity, increased risk-taking, true accountability, massively increased participation, and authentic collegiality among us. We learned something about this during the lockdown brought about by Covid 19. Plus we face a reduction in the numbers of clergy & parishes. We now need to support and resource small-scale and scattered groups of Christians. This is *not* the same as what has been called the Benedict option of isolation, of living in a Christian ghetto, of /withdrawal from mainstream society, nor is it being militantly counter-cultural, as if we are a purist elite of the true believers setting ourselves up against a sin-sodden world. Of course, there *are* forces to be resisted. But we need to learn how to witness in a way that is both credible and winsome.

[explain that factors bearing on current situation in the Church will come AFTER the next section]

5. From whose perspective?

And the task of being credible and winsome brings me back to the ancient teaching of Aristotle on rhetoric. We still have much to learn from him if we want to communicate effectively. [Comment on **logos, ethos, pathos**; identification (appearance, colour, clothes, age, accent, vocabulary, etc) & accommodation.]

If Aristotle is right about the ingredients of persuasive communication, this should prompt us to ask ourselves, not only, What is it we want to communicate?, but also, How might this be heard by other people? In other words, to ponder the question about communication: **from whose perspective?** Take the example of a school; what is seen, heard, conveyed, understood and taken in in schools differs according to whether you are a young child, a teenager, a relatively young teacher, an older teacher, a supply or visiting teacher, the Principal, or a parent or grandparent, an inspector, a diocesan advisor, a chaplain, one of the office staff, a cleaner, etc.

Even at Sunday Mass, what is seen, heard, taken in, understood or remembered afterwards differs according to whether you are the priest celebrating and presiding, a child or young person, someone who has been at that parish for many years, a visitor for whom this is your first time there. It also differs according to the level of education you have had, both secular and religious education and of course, depending also on the depth of one's faith. We know that at baptisms, marriages and funerals in church the person presiding at the liturgy has the difficult challenge of including those attending the occasion who rarely if ever attend church normally, people whose familiarity with or understanding of what goes on is thin to say the least.

Now, as a step towards being more sensitive to the perspective of others – and here I mean, people of all ages - in our attempt to communicate credibly and winsomely, I can envisage a time when we might benefit from borrowing (from the world of education) the concept of a class covenant (or contract) and applying it to the context of church life and communication. A classroom covenant is intended to foster buy-in and ownership, and a shared responsibility for creating a constructive classroom ethos. Teachers who use this practice of developing with their students such an agreement at the beginning of an academic year set aside some time to work out – in partnership with their students – what their respective hopes and expectations are of each other; what they want to get out of the relationship – and then what rules are needed to help this to have a better chance of coming true. Four questions are central to working out that covenant: What do my classmates need from me? What do I need from my classmates? What do I need from the teacher? What does the teacher need from me? Imagine these four questions were modified to apply to relations between clergy and laity. What do my fellow parishioners need from me? What do I need from them? What do I need from my pastor? What does he (and soon, I hope, we can also say, she) need from me? Might such questions lead to a more mature and healthy communicative climate in the Church?

6. Factors that have a bearing on the current situation in the Church

(15 - in no particular order)

- (i) a lack of biblical literacy;
- (ii) many of us have been colonised by and we have accommodated ourselves to cultural norms and expectations that do not support Christian faith;
- (iii) clericalism has led to passivity and infantilisation of many laity (many of whom are complicit in clericalism because this seems to let them off the hook of responsibility);
- (iv) we lack plausibility structures that support the faith (e.g., participation in like-minded faith groups outside of Sunday liturgy);
- (v) we are insufficiently converted and fired up by our faith (we cannot witness to or winsomely invite others into something we are lukewarm about);
- (vi) despite great efforts by many in our schools, there has been a shortfall in the quality of Catholic education (mission drift; overwhelmed by managerialism and other modern heresies; insufficient understanding of Catholic ethos; restriction of Catholicism to RE, occasional collective worship, some aspects of pastoral care, but

no deep curriculum connection; serious lack of theological literacy among many school leaders);

(vii) the failures of church leadership and a lack of moral credibility – sadly, in some cases, a lack of imagination, courage and pastoral wisdom;

(viii) the dysfunctional ethos in the Church - dismal communication structures between laity and clergy and bishops and an unwillingness to set up proper channels for consultation, though perhaps that is changing in the new emphasis on synodality;

(ix) patterns of family life (marriage breakdown, high rates of single parenthood, both parents needing to work, economic insecurity) not conducive to ethos and practice of faith formation in the home;

(x) lack of appropriate life-long learning in the Church;

(xi) the impact of pluralism (other faiths, other Christians, non-religious) on confidence in using faith-language with others;

(xii) the separation of religion into an (often isolated) compartment of life (disconnected from the rest of life);

(xiii) the church has concentrated on maintaining what we have got rather than being missionary;

(xiv) there has been far too much trust in and reliance on views and rules of the Roman Curia by our Church leaders. This has stifled creativity, initiative and local responsibility.

(xv) the failure to tackle various abuses within the church and the continuing failure to listen adequately to the voices of women or to include them at every level of leadership and ministry has been very damaging.

7. Ways forward

Some of you might think that I am being too harsh in my diagnosis of the state of things in the Church – and perhaps I am. But I am not despondent about this moment. Another word for a crisis is an opportunity. I am sure that God is at work in our world and in the midst of our personal and communal shortcomings. Our faith has always faced opposition, setbacks and challenges; and Christians have responded with the gifts given us by God. So let me now, in this final section, speak more positively about how we can credibly communicate our faith today. What qualities and features contribute to credible Christian communication today?

There is a difference between self-limitation - with regard to *how* we conduct ourselves in a dialogue - which should be in a way that is humble, respectful, open, patient, listening, willing to learn from the other(s), etc, - and holding back (for fear of offence or of being ridiculed?) our real reasons for belief. We should articulate our position in its own terms at the same time as being willing to translate this into terms others find accessible. As Leonard Franchi said to

me in an email: Some understandings of dialogue ‘*open the door not to authentic dialogue but to exit routes from the Christian worldview*’.

Christian communication – to be effective - should make connections between worship and the world of work; between sacrament and service; and between home-life and faith-life. Christian faith aims for transformation: of our loves and lifestyle; and of our thinking. It leads us to union with God and friendship with other people and God’s creation. We know only too well what some of the challenges are in sharing Christian faith today, for example: holding one’s nerve; being true to the best of our living tradition; and remaining open to and invitational towards a diversity of views. This requires of us a combination of emotional rootedness & stability; depth of understanding; and flexibility and creativity in responding to people. Let me propose six qualities that help us engage in credible Christian communication today, **six ‘F’s**: We should be friendly, fervent, fertile, flexible, fun-loving (equivalent to Augustine’s *levitas/lightness of touch*) and need to have firm foundations.

A Catholic vision of life in many places has receded from view and we would benefit greatly from renewing and reviving this. But we should be cautious about adopting a cultural warrior stance. Here are two reasons to be cautious. First, some versions of Catholicism seem to me to distort our understanding of what is entailed in Christian faith. Second, some aspects of the secular world can be healthily challenging to and rightly critical of some Catholic tendencies and practices in the past and present (the child sex abuse by clergy and for so long its cover-up is only one example). Much of the secular world has a better record than the Church on accountability, transparency, fair process, concern for equality, etc. So, while we should be confident about our Catholic tradition, this confidence must be chastened and qualified by humility and an acknowledgement of the church’s shortcomings and where we need to listen to and learn from some developments in the secular world.

We often tend to judge ourselves by what we have produced or achieved. But what we need to realize, at least, what *I* need to realize, is that the presence of a person who is in love with God is enough. Our presence, not our productivity; that is what God wants from us. It is not so much our ability that God has need of, but our availability. And our presence and our availability is helped if we can add to it a degree of prudence, wisdom, sensitivity, realism and reverence. Above all, we should be faithful, truthful, trustful, hopeful, joyful and loving.

References

ⁱ Quoted by Robert Crawford, *Eliot After the Waste Land* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2022, p.112).

ⁱⁱ Chantal Delsol, *La fin de la Chrétienté* (Paris: Cerf, 2021).