

INTER MIRIFICA: SOCIAL COMMUNICATIONS

The printing press, discovered in the mid-15th century, is considered by some to be the decisive instrument that enabled the success of the Protestant revolt that divides the Church in the west even to this day. Reformers made effective use of the new technology to publish tracts and even the Bible itself while the Church was slow to adopt the revolutionary device.

Thus you might be surprised to know that the first issue that the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council tackled was not ecumenism or ecclesiology but rather Communications. *Inter Mirifica*, “Among the Wonderful,” was promulgated on December 4, 1963. It was the first decree of the Second Vatican Council and addressed the relationship of the Church to Media and Social Communications. The late 50’s and early 60’s were not that different than our own time of rapid change in methods of communication. In the early 20th century, newspapers gave way to radio, and by the time of the Council, radio was being dwarfed by television. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council recognized the twofold purpose of communication to inform and to entertain.

Indeed, we find in *Inter Mirifica* what is referred to as a “right to information” but with the caveat that the information communicated must be “true and complete within the bounds of justice and charity”. Some think that our news climate has become more vicious due to the Internet and a 24-hour news cycle. Yet the purpose of the Council was not simply to offer a diagnosis of ailments facing the Church and our World. Rather, to propose how we might address these challenges in a meaningful way that would lead to a deepening of faith. Thus, support of the Catholic Press was specifically hailed as an important contribution the Church ought to make to our broader society. Indeed, the articulated purpose for this directive was to influence public opinion.

The impact of increasing licentiousness found on the silver screen and in popular culture was also a concern for the Church. The Council Fathers sought to stimulate questions around the purpose of art.

Though it was fifty years ago, it was a time when violence and obscenity were just beginning to permeate the entertainment industry. No longer did art seem to ennoble humanity but rather depict meaninglessness or depravity. Many of the questions they raise are pertinent for us still today.

To that end, it seemed appropriate to remind us that film and television also had to be the work of the Church. As it is the work of the Church, there was a call for clergy and religious to be specifically trained in these means of communication. While other matters in the Council seemed to be disputed, it was clear that the rapid changes in technology were exerting a profound influence upon the world and that the voice of Christians and the Church must be a part of that conversation.

Inter Mirifica is as prescient today as it was in 1963. How different would our world be had the Church not made full and effective use of the printing press? In the Diocese of Brooklyn, the ministry of Communications is specifically entrusted to DeSales Media Group, but it is in fact the work of us all. *The Tablet* is one of our iconic means of communicating. It is true that newspapers are in decline, yet they maintain an important place to enable meaningful discourse. The dominant instrument for fostering the dissemination of information is now websites and the Internet. Television is also rapidly changing. The proliferation of mobile devices as the primary means for social networking, news and entertainment cannot be underestimated. Advances in communications are taking place not over decades or years but over the span of weeks and months.

Some have opined that today’s milieu is eerily reminiscent of that of 15th century Europe. Perhaps a fresh reading of *Inter Mirifica* might serve as a reminder to all the pitfalls we face by ignoring or under-utilizing modern means of communications. Our battle cry is perhaps not “Remember the Alamo” but rather, “Remember the Gutenberg Printing Press.”

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