A Context

I suggest that we expand our thinking about communication beyond the term “media” employed in the title of this conference. As many of you know there are several genres of communication theory. One author notes that *structural and functional theories* are rooted in the organization of language and social systems. *Cognitive and behavioral communication theories*, which came out of psychology, focus on the individual. Another genre, *interpretive theories* of communication, include phenomenology and hermeneutics. A fourth genre would be *critical theories* of communication with their commentaries on society and social practice, like Marxism and feminism. Finally, there are *interactional theories* of communication – viewing social life as a process of interactions. (I’m personally comfortable in this niche, because of my interest in new interactive technologies like the Internet.)
Or one could group communication studies around key phrases such as: message; interpersonal communication; group and public communication;

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mass communication; and cultural context. So you see the terms “media” or “mass media” refer to only a small segment of the field of communication studies.

I would also like to suggest that we expand the term “religion” in the title of this conference so we can speak not only about religious practice or religious institutions, but we can talk about theology. As Catherine Mowry LaCugna says: “… an issue is theologically significant… if it prompts us to examine our deepest beliefs about God, about the divine-human relationship, about the nature of human personhood and human destiny.”

(America, October 10, 1992).

A Proposition

And now that I’ve stretched all of you – from media to communication studies, and from religion out to theology -- now I’d like to state a rather bold proposition. (By this time you are probably used to hearing bold propositions from residents of the United States!) My proposition is this: I believe that all of the topics discussed at this
conference, all of the conceptual issues raised, all of the challenges worried about – that all of this can be enriched and empowered by the recent development of a new field of studies called Communication Theology.

This statement springs from my own doctoral studies at Harvard and M.I.T., and from several decades of personal experience in the areas of commercial television, work in church communication, and a position in the academic world – as well as a number of years working at the Communication Theology task. I refer to this task metaphorically as constructing a new conceptual and practical theology – a building or edifice for the new millennium.

In my presentation I will do four things. First I will present a rationale for my great faith in, and our need for, Communication Theology. Secondly, I will present a chronology of some very significant work done in this field over the last decade. Next, I will briefly discuss two specific examples of the fruitful integration of the fields of communication and theology. One is the Common Ground Initiative inaugurated in the U.S. Catholic Church by the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin. Another example is the work of the theologian Robert Schreiter incorporating communication
and cultural studies into his reflections on the growth of multicultural local theologies around the world.

Finally, I want to suggest some specific strategies for fostering the institutionalization of Communication Theology as a framework for analyzing media, religion, and culture.

I will try to do this in less than the time allotted to me so there will be extra time to hear your responses and reactions. Although most of my own experience has been with the Catholic Church in the U.S., I am very anxious to network ecumenically and internationally on the Communication Theology task.

A Rationale

First, then, what is Communication Theology and why do it? Communication Theology as a field of knowledge allows us to integrate the riches of communication studies into the theological enterprise. Something similar occurred when liberation theory fostered Liberation Theology and feminist theory infused Feminist Theology. Doesn’t it make sense to enrich theology with the research and practice we’ve accumulated in
communication studies over the last eighty years? Especially since we all live (even theologians live) in a mediated culture!

Let me share some of the benefits I see for all of us as we construct the Communication Theology edifice.

I have often thought of theologians as the research and development arm for churches – a sort of “think tank” where new paradigms can be constructed. The Second Vatican Council occurred in the Catholic Church primarily because creative theologians were stretching their thinking in the decades before the Council. And even as the bishops met in Council, each evening in Rome – over wine and pasta – the theologians were goading the bishops into bold new statements about religious liberty, about the church in the modern world, about the renewal of worship and religious life.

This is an example of the practical impact of creative and up-to-date theology. Now I’ll state another bold proposition: *I don’t think we will ever get most churches, church leaders, or seminaries, to value and utilize the rich resources of communication studies (or even media studies) as part of their thinking and practice until we have integrated many different facets of communication studies into theology.* This deep and
widespread theological integration does not seem to take place even when there are very fine religious training programs in communication studies. Many graduates of these programs acquire knowledge of the field of communication. However, the theology (and certainly the practices) of their religious institutions continue to view communication (and mass media, in particular) as something apart from church policy, religious experience and theology.

Church leaders – at both the national and the local level – are products of their training. At the present time that training generally does not include media studies because “the media” are considered something apart from theology and religious education.

Liberation Theology also proves that there are very practical, down-to-earth ramifications when theological thought inflames practice at the grassroots level and when, in return, this real-world experience informs theology deeply. Solid classics written in the field of liberation theology have articulated principles that could not be ignored either in seminaries or in senate chambers.
Feminist theology represents a vital revision of the fundamental themes and methods of theology. Of course, not all theologians or church leaders are comfortable with these new fields. However, as the literature grows and the grassroots action continues – eventually change occurs in theology, in religious institutions and in practice.

It seems to be true in most countries that local bishops or diocesan communication directors think of “the media” as something that has to be managed or controlled instead of truly understanding the *theological* implications of a wide range of communication-studies theories and practices.

*A Chronology of Events*

As I list events leading to the development of Communication Theology you will continue to hear of topics ripe for integration into theology. I used to think of these topical areas as bridges between the two fields. However, it is important to end up with theology, not with communication, so terms like “Communication *and* Theology” or “A Theology *of* Communication” do not seem to be appropriate or effective.

The foundation for this Communication Theology edifice was laid in a series of seminars begun by the Gregorian University in Rome almost two
decades ago and continuing still. Every two years theologians and communication scholars and practitioners came together for a week of reflection. Various seminars have focused on communication and: fundamental theology, philosophy, moral theology, ecclesiology, religious film, and popular culture. Books based on some of these conferences have been published by Sheed and Ward in the U.S. The Jesuit Bob White has been the architect of these meetings.

Another building block has been a series of symposia held annually for almost a decade at the Catholic Theological Society of America (CTSA). With the support of CTSA and the UNDA communication association, Father Bob Bonnot and I have coordinated these sessions, held each year at the CTSA convention. Usually a major theologian addresses a topic and other theologians and communication experts interact. Bob and I usually organize a pre-planning session where a small group of theologians and communicators help the CTSA presenter-theologian to see his or her topic’s varied connections with communication studies.

These CTSA convention sessions have addressed issues like: “Narrative and Communication Theology in a Postliterate Culture;” “The
Mystery and Task of Self-Communication in Trinitarian Theology;” “The Theology of Preaching;” and “New Models of Reception Theory.” One theologian stated at a CTSA symposium: “We have used hermeneutics as a method of inquiry in theology for more than a decade. We must now move to Communication Theology as an analytical framework for all of our theological work.”

So we have had symposia – both in Rome and at the primary theological professional association in the U.S. However, other building blocks exist. There are fine communication programs of study at the Gregorian University and the Salesian Pontifical University in Rome. Pierre Babin’s program in Lyon has trained more than a thousand pastoral agents from 110 different countries and conducted over 500 sessions in Africa, South America, Asia, Australia and Europe. There are programs here at the University of Edinburgh and in London. In the U.S., Ohio boasts two fine programs: the Pastoral Communication and Ministry program at the University of Dayton and Tom Boomershine’s graduate program in media and ministry at United Theological Seminary.

And there is a developing interest in academic programs in Communication Theology. Duquesne University in Pittsburgh is seriously
considering such a program. I have taught a Communication Theology
course at Notre Dame College in Cleveland and would be willing to share
my syllabus with anyone interested in adapting it elsewhere. I hope to have
the course online in the near future.

An encouraging development is that a growing number of doctoral
students in theology have contacted me for guidance in selecting a
dissertation topic that is Communication Theology-based. One young
woman at Union Theological in New York City is analyzing “the moral
dimension of
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cyber-communities” during her orals there. These inquiries are coming out
of the field of theological studies, not communication studies. That is a
significant breakthrough.

And the Communication Theology enterprise has been enhanced by
the interest shown by the International Study Commission on Media,
Religion, and Culture <jmcommunications.com> My own membership on
the commission keeps Communication Theology solidly on its agenda.
Practical Case Studies

Now for a brief look at several specific examples I would define as Communication Theology-based. First, the process known as “Common Ground.”

When we use the term dialogue we are obviously referring to a communication practice. There is an interesting dialogic process underway which will probably have profound implications for the U.S. Catholic Church as it unfolds.

Began under the leadership of the late Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, the Common Ground mission is to initiate many different projects, tasks, and communities of dialogue within the Catholic Church. It is not, in itself, a project, with a specific task to be completed; it is, rather, a stimulus to many different discussion forums.

The statement inaugurating the initiative is entitled “Called to be Catholic: Church in a Time of Peril” and is reprinted in America magazine (August 31, 1996). There was a powerful response to this call for dialogue among Catholic Church members who are polarized and divided. Within a few months there were about four hundred thousand copies of the statement
in print and it was featured widely in the press, and on radio and TV in the U.S. In its early stages almost two thousand people downloaded the statement from the electronic home page of the Archdiocese of Chicago. It has now been translated into other languages.

Some people are uneasy fostering dialogue about a church’s authoritative teaching. Some felt this would resort to bitter debates rather than healthy respectful discussion. Cardinal Bernardin responded: “… the premise of our statement is that many serious disagreements that exist among Catholics do not necessarily involve dissent in the sense of a clear departure from authentic teaching. The statement recognizes the legitimacy, even the value, of disagreements when the discussion takes place within boundaries.”

The Catholic Common Ground Initiative sponsors an annual Symposium in March and has published two books: one includes all the foundational documents, the other, Church Authority in American Culture, includes the documents and discussion of one symposium.

Many national organizations and universities have sponsored Common Ground events of their own. The Odyssey cable TV channel broadcast twelve programs featuring Common Ground discussions.
Most important for local congregations, seven videotapes – with discussion guides – are available from: National Pastoral Life Center, 18 Bleecker St., NY, NY 10012 (Telephone: 212-431-7825). Their Email: commonground@nplc.org

Common Ground integrates theology and communication in a very practical and grassroots way. On a different level the work of the theologian Robert Schreiter has forged a bold integration of theology and communication and cultural studies.

Schreiter, who recently retired as President of CTSA, has attended many of our Communication Theology seminars there. Schreiter writes:

There has been an important shift in perspective in theology in recent years. …much more attention is now being paid to how … circumstances shape the response to the gospel… (This) shift in perspective… first became evident in regions where Christianity was relatively new … in parts of Africa and Asia. (Constructing Local Theologies, p.1)

There was a growing sense that the theologies being inherited from the older churches of the North Atlantic community did not fit well into these quite different cultural circumstances.

In several of his recent books, Schreiter reflects on various aspects of communication: codes; cross-cultural communication; intercultural
communication flows; intercultural hermeneutics; semiotics of culture; and new technologies.

In his departing presidential address, Schreiter focused on the development of doctrine in a world church. He spoke of a shift of the epistemological axis from a propositional format to Revelation as event or encounter. He spoke of moving from an egocentric to a sociocentric church. *Emerging communication technologies, Schreiter notes, represent a new opportunity to be dialogical and theological within local cultures.*

Robert Schreiter’s theological writings, like the Bernardin Common Ground work, represent opportunities to solidify the structure of Communication Theology.

A body of Communication Theology literature exists and I have listed many of the items in the bibliography of this paper. One of the first was Paul Soukup’s fine review of the literature published several decades ago. It would be helpful to have a similar analysis undertaken today. As the body of work grows, however, we need to think about strategies for the future.
A Strategic Plan

My third proposition is this: Communication Theology will really be constructed when a number of foundational theology classics are written for the field – just as we saw this happen in liberation and feminist areas of theology. These works must be authored by theologians, although with guidance from specialists in communication and cultural studies. These authors will perhaps be young theologians who can think outside of the conceptual “boxes” of the past. Plans are now underway to get financial support for such writing projects, to hold additional conferences, perhaps to initiate a web site, to plug into religious educators, and to get the Communication Theology construction project solidified in other ways.

I invite all interested individuals to help us build this significant structure in order to meet the “media, religion and culture” challenges of the future!

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