



**ONLINE MEETING
OF THE PRESS OFFICERS AND SPOKESPERSONS
OF THE EUROPEAN BISHOPS' CONFERENCES**

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from 9:00 to 12:00 (CEST)

**ON THE FRONT LINE DURING THE PANDEMIC.
THE DELICATE ROLE OF INFORMATION**

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I thank you for the invitation and for the title given to my speech, which requires me to reflect on the role of information during the pandemic. A role described as “front line” and then “delicate”.

“Front line” because information was never withdrawn. Even when lockdowns forced many categories of people and workers to retreat to their homes, journalists never stopped, some working from home, with remote working arrangements, others continuing to go out, to guarantee an “essential” service: the right of citizens to be informed, which is all the more valuable and important during a pandemic period.

A “delicate” role because information is a bridge between citizens and institutions, between the scientific community and the population, a bond and builder of community or - on the contrary - an instrument of division and disintegration. Our words not only interpret reality, but also contribute to shape and direct it. We have experienced this particularly clearly in this period of our history when, at the same time as the pandemic, what has been called the **infodemic** has also spread: namely, the **abundance of information**, not all of which is accurate, that “*make it difficult for people to find reliable sources when they need them*”. (making it difficult to distinguish the truth from the false / the good from the bad).

In number 50 of *Fratelli tutti* Pope Francis warns: “The flood of information at our fingertips does not make for greater wisdom. Wisdom is not born of quick searches on the internet nor is it a mass of unverified data (...) The process of building fraternity, be it local or universal, can only be undertaken by spirits that are free and open to authentic encounters”. Wisdom... what and how to choose... with which criteria... for what future. This is the big question facing humanity, and it also applies to information, called to **choose** the news, **contextualise** it, **hierarchise** it, starting with a question of foundation and of meaning: what kind of world do we want to build? What is important to pass on to the new generations and what is not?

The pandemic period was accompanied by **disinformation**, put in place by those who produce false content, but also by **misinformation** (carried out by those who promote false content).

Particularly serious is the fact that we have seen political and institutional subjects - and the worlds connected to them become actors of disinformation and misinformation. Think of those heads of State or governments who denied the danger of covid while people were already dying... The same have become subjects of **disintermediation** (those

who, even in the public arena, try to communicate directly, eliminating the mediation of professional journalism, which is supposed to help distinguish the true from the false, and increasingly unmask fake news as well as disseminate real news). Fake news is usually not blatant lies, but rather half-truths, unverified facts, doubts spread artificially in order to question - in the case at hand - the ability of the authorities to deal with the pandemic: "all the best lies have a core of truth". And we have seen so many lies that fed false beliefs that verified and credible information had to "dismantle", while it was itself in search of a truth that could not be taken for granted, the one that science itself was seeking (the nature of the virus, the most effective ways to fight it, the most appropriate policy choices...)

We have discovered how important is:

1. **Service information**, made up of all those news items that communicated what could be done and what could not, how rule of behaviour, timetables and the ways of daily life were to be changed.
2. **Proximity information**. The journalists who went into laboratories and research centres, into the covid wards of hospitals, those who reported on 'absence', emptiness, death, deprivation, searching for the most appropriate ways and words to help us process - by talking about it - what we were all experiencing. This type of journalism was the memory of this historical period, and also helped to accompany certain people suffering from loneliness, preventing, in some cases, physical distancing from becoming social distancing.
3. **Medical and scientific alongside institutional information**. Not only in Italy, which has discovered how valuable it is to have a national health service, one of the consequences of COVID has been the disproportion between the demand for care and the capacity to respond. Care presupposes a relationship, we have seen heroic examples of medical staff taking on the task of *receiving, treating* and *accompanying* the sick person. We have also seen how necessary scientific information is, which requires specific preparation but also the ability to disseminate it in order to speak "to everyone" and not only to insiders. We have also noted the limits of scientific information (luminaries who are not used to speaking to the public, journalists who are unable to focus the questions or understand the answers, difficulties in reading epidemiological figures and curves...). All this tells us what can be improved.

The Language

On the language of this frontline journalism, with its delicate role, I would like to emphasise the verbs and words that speak of emptiness, absence, deprivation, the use of warlike metaphors. The latter were seen by some as negative: as part of a "rhetoric" (*curfew* to tell the time by which everyone had to be home, *war* on the virus, the *enemy* to be put down with the right *weapons*...), while for others the use of a language "of war" was the result of a lack of adequate language to describe an unseen, extraordinary, unprecedented situation. I was reminded of Primo Levi, the author to whom I dedicated

my degree many years ago, who was one of the most lucid witnesses of the horror of Auschwitz, who had a scientific mindset and ability to analyse (he was a chemist), but who realised that there was no adequate language to express the “black hole” of Auschwitz: I quote, from *If This is a Man*: *“Just as this hunger of ours is not the feeling of someone who has skipped a meal, so our way of being cold would require a special name. We say ‘hunger’, we say ‘tiredness’, ‘fear’, and ‘pain’, we say ‘winter’, and they are other things. They are free words, created and used by free men who lived, enjoying and suffering, in their homes. If the Lagers had lasted longer, a new harsh language would have been born; and there is a need for it”*.

Similarly, how can you describe death by breathlessness, the emptiness of families who see their loved ones enter hospital and die there, without being able to say goodbye, without the possibility of a funeral.... And mass graves, seen in some parts of the world. Yet in this terrible context there was no lack of experiences of closeness, as well as words of hope, consolation and encouragement, sometimes the silences and symbolic images spoke. The nurses (always women...) in Italy, between the symbolic images of “care”.

Nurse 1: https://www.adnkronos.com/covid-infermieri-simbolo-pandemia-dalle-foto-stremati-a-vasco_3I1eGmCavAkPqLrCOPVIRE

Nurse 2: <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/i-volti-partita-contro-coronavirus-alessia-bonari-l-infermiera-simbolo-impegno-profuso-ospedali-ADvFIXAB>

Nurse 3:

https://www.ilmessaggero.it/mind_the_gap/coronavirus_dottoressa_culla_italia_immagine-5105322.html

I was among the few on the evening of 27 March in St Peter's Square when Pope Francis crossed the deserted square for the prayer against the pandemic, followed by Eucharistic Adoration and Urbi et orbi blessing. It was one of the strongest, most symbolic images of this period, accompanied by the warning that we are all in the same boat, and no one is saved alone. I was among the few on the evening of 27 March in St Peter's Square when Pope Francis crossed the deserted square for the prayer against the pandemic, followed by Eucharistic Adoration and Urbi et orbi blessing. It was one of the strongest, most symbolic images of this period, accompanied by the warning that we are all in the same boat, and no one is saved alone. I will not dwell on the communication of the Church and the Pope because Andrea Monda will talk about it more specifically, but I would like to emphasise how important it was, despite the difficulties and in some cases the contradictions, to feel the presence of Christian communities that have transferred online part of their lives and relationships, and even religious celebrations.

In Italy the pandemic has introduced into our language a verbal tense that is not usually used: the anterior future. It refers to a future far ahead in time, coming after the near future, so we say, "when all this is over", but it risks "burning" the near future, the one closest to us, which we build with our present. But the anterior future cannot be reached without passing through the near future, to which we should look without concern and with a sense of responsibility, even as journalists.

When masses resumed in Fatima in mid-March, a priest declared: “we are ordained to serve, to speak of God to his people. That is why for us to speak to empty pews as we did during this period of confinement, when Masses were broadcast through social media, is an experience that leaves a mark”. Similarly, long-distance communication has left its mark on all of us, and today we need not to forget, but to grasp the meaning and significance of what we have experienced in order to look ahead. The word sense comes from the Latin *sensus*, which refers to inner feeling. For the ancients, *sensus* stemmed from experiencing fears, listening to desires. Hence the reflection on who one wants to be and where one wants to go, choosing words as bridges, to help unite, to feel part of a whole, the community, or even humanity. We need a new model of integral human development that puts the great issue of environmental sustainability back at the centre of the economy and growth, as the Pope argues in *Laudato Si* (released in 2015, we might say in unsuspected times, but prophetic), as a consumerist system that no longer holds sway fades away.

In closing I wanted to make a quick reference to an experience from last year. Last summer I worked on a volume called, *Pandemie mediali*:



which was a multi-voiced reflection on the pandemic and information. It contains 61 signatures, with more than 70 personalities involved: professors and researchers from 12 Italian universities, television, radio and printed journalists, professionals working in the communications offices of institutions, bodies, associations and organisations, a dozen young people (una decina di giovani), collaboration with UCSI (*unione cattolica stampa italiana/Italian Catholic Press Union*) and some fifteen or so authors of its magazine Desk. We have observed how the theme of communication cuts across all areas of life and how valuable are the opportunities for dialogue between journalists and scholars. Today we are at the end of a long winter of living with the virus, and the spread

of vaccines gives us hope of a return to normality, even if the uncertainties and contradictions that we have experienced will be carried with us. We cannot think of going back to the world of before, as if nothing had happened, as if we had experienced a parenthesis.

I conclude with a motto of St Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists, which goes like this:

“One must have a heart capable of patience; great designs can only be realised with a great deal of patience and time”.

For the rebuilding, the rebirth, the resurrection, in the Christian sense which says, in the Latin etymology of *resurgere*, to put back on its feet what is bent, much patience is needed. However, time has become short. We do not have much of it.