CHRISTIAN DISCERNMENT IN A MASS-MEDIATED CULTURE

by James McDonnell

Christian discernment means looking at and listening to our mass-media culture with the eyes and ears of Christ. We are asked to see truly and hear clearly the sights and sounds of the media so that we may know what values and meanings are informing our culture; but it is difficult to see and hear in a world filled with noise, noise that we take for granted. We tend to become conscious of the media only occasionally.

The Media is the 'Message'

We are creatures of habit and our uses of the media are mostly habitual, unreflecting and routine. From the time the alarm clock and the radio announce that the day has begun until we fall asleep in front of the television screen at night, our senses are bombarded by media images and sounds. Throughout the day, at home, office or factory, in the car or on the train, we turn to radio, newspaper, magazine, television, paperback or stereo 'walkman' to pass the time, provide topics of conversation, or keep us up-to-date. At night, television provides the essential accompaniment to our family or community life as we plan our evening around the programmed schedules.

The Skills of Discernment

Following Christ in a media culture demands that we become aware of how we use the media to shape the routine of our lives. It also demands that we should examine critically the "messages" purveyed by the media. This critical awareness has in turn to be complemented by communicative action; and both awareness and action have to be informed by a contemplative spirit. Communicative action is a way of communicating that implicitly challenges the one-way flow of information which is the mass media. Communicative action tries to live out the idea that authentic communication is a sharing of meaning and values. Finally, the contemplative spirit ensures that both awareness and action are placed at the service of Christ and his purposes.

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