

Communicating the simphony of truth: public discourse, christian identity and social values in the 21st century

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Cultural and legislative changes have taken place of late in many western countries. Institutions with a Christian identity have to cope with changes that make up the context of communication, so as to develop and share values in the post-secular public sphere. To offer a “symphony of truth” and express it through actions and speech is the way of establishing positive relations and contributing values of one’s own to those of a society belonging to all.

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Truth is like a precious stone:

It seduces when held in the hand but hurts when received in the face.

Jorge Bergoglio

Words are increasingly important. American consultant Frank Luntz says that during the presidential campaign for the US President, someone accused Barack Obama of being “the candidate of words”. The retort of the then Democratic Senator was forceful: “They say words don’t matter. I had a dream: are they just words?” Words change history, found countries, mobilize multitudes, unite people in marriage, declare some guilty and others innocent, expel or welcome, and express what one bears in one’s heart. Andrew Mitchell, British MP, lost his political seat after calling a security guard “pleb”. A speech on “why women are poor in science” forced the resignation of Larry Summers, president of Harvard: of course, a woman succeeded him in his post. Pope Francis caused an international stir by saying that the Armenian massacre was the first genocide of the 20th Century. We live in a world of words: if it is important in any milieu, it is particularly so in public debates on values. They are times of change; with Frédéric Martel one can say that globalization is not only economic, but also one of values. Such values affect us all and are on everyone’s lips, they cross cultures and geographical boundaries, flood the pages of the dailies, parliaments, courts of law and cafes.

| 1) The new legal and communication context

One of the latest characteristics is the consolidation of a cultural and juridical framework where certain values, fundamental until not so long ago for many, are now questioned by increasingly large sectors of society. In many countries there occurs a complex process of social change, legalized in a number of them, that affects the core identity of persons and groups, particularly educational and welfare centres: hospitals, health centres, soup

kitchens, homes for the elderly. This scenario poses questions and challenges about a pluralistic society and its capacity to accommodate different conceptions of what is good serenely. The novelty can be resumed into a question: how to contribute to the common good when there is doubt, or downright denial, that the very proposals are social goods?

This new legal context arises in parallel with a new communication environment, producing noteworthy changes in public debates about values. In a very short time there has arisen a surfeit of speakers, issues, social situations and possible registers, thanks to the proliferation of social networks and the spreading of smart phones. Today it is much easier to insert a speech in a public forum because it is not necessary to go through the filter of a newspaper editor or of a television producer. Anyone can register a situation hitherto private or semipublic and insert it into a milieu of world consumption. What happens in a classroom or in a bus can become a national trend and appear on the evening news that very day. The potentiality of the digital world has democratized what is being said, at the same time reducing or minimizing intimacy and privacy.

2) The spiral of silence v. the symphony of truth

The change of milieu is a reality with objective consequences. We tend to adopt what we judge to be the majority opinion. On the contrary, we find it difficult to declare our stand when we perceive that the majority of those surrounding us think the opposite, which ends up in a spiral of silence.^[1] The sensation of unanimity possesses a factual forcefulness. Whoever confronts a current of growing opinion will suffer a hostile pressure. If a group of football fans or an official publicly criticizes a player for being an African American, all politicians and opinion leaders will feel urged to issue public negative judgements of the authors of the discrimination, and if it is expedient propose sanctions against them. It happened to Donald Sterling, owner of the franchise of Los Angeles Clippers of the NBA, who was fined and punished for uttering offensive statement against African American players.

The cultural and social change sets up new criteria of public judgement of behaviour and declarations. This challenge increases the need for the “symphony of truth”.^[2] From the Christian point of view, Benedict XVI said, what has been lost is a unitary cultural matrix around “the values inspired in the faith”. Therefore proposals with values are received out of context, without context or in different contexts. Interpretations are incomplete, equivocal or out of all proportion. A Catholic speaker intending to live up to his identity and richness of his message must be capable of expressing the truth symphonically, articulating various levels and differences in order of relevance, avoiding turning a secondary value into an absolute one, or allowing it to be perceived as a counter value because of inadequate expression. In musical terms, if the second trumpet sounds so loud as to impose itself on the first violin, outside the framework of the orchestra, a kind of absolutism results that may be appreciated by an expert, but for the general public it may well be a disagreeable noise, even if it follows the score faithfully.

3) Problems of legitimacy

For historical and social reasons, it is necessary to consider the fact that large sectors of public opinion accept the fiction that Christians are intolerant and potentially discriminatory.

This dark cloud floats over Catholicism, as an influence of an extended European rationalism. It forms part of the new cultural fabric, and it is one of the elements of the framework whence the Church and the institutions of Christian identity are questioned. This context generates a latent tension in public debate. The debate touches the roots of our societies, and it is formulated starting from a negative judgement: is to promote Christian values to improve the world, or is it to discriminate and hurt others? Are Christian values compatible with the plural and democratic society of the 21st Century?

If the symphony of truth fails to be conveyed, thus reducing the Christian message to a series of controversial postulates, the validity of the aforementioned questions gains in acceptance, and the mist of doubt swamps the public space. The panorama can even get worse: since the commonly shared values have diverged from Catholic ones, supporting some of them may trigger off a “communication scandal”, i.e. a type of conflict that amply questions the legitimacy of the accused, jeopardizing his social survival. Since educational institutions act in a regulated framework, at times even financed by the State, they can be specifically affected by today’s tensions.

The new situation presents a redistribution of legitimacies, new consents and dissents, which shape the educational context where educational centres of Catholic inspiration perform. Hence it becomes necessary to understand “a series of questionings coming from a change in mentality (Benedict XVI), and institutionally answering such questionings by going deep into the identity, engendering a culture, projects, discourses and social relations that give life to values at the service of the communities with their new questions, mentality and needs.

As the framework of shared values shrinks, the efforts at relating and self-explaining ought to increase: the gap is more pronounced. Speeches, actions, and ways of relating need to manifest one’s framework of values more explicitly than before.

As a way of doing this on referring to the Church and to the acting of Christians, the Pope uses the term “field hospital”. In this new context (a battle) a new answer ought to be offered: first tackle what is urgent, later go to the rest, “without renouncing the truth, goodness and the light that one can contribute when perfection is not possible” (*Evangelii Gaudium*).

In earlier stages, when a framework of common interpretation existed (Benedict XVI called it “unitary fabric”) the positive contribution of the Christian teachings was seen as evident, so that a public declaration of such values could be interpreted clearly. “A” meant “A”.

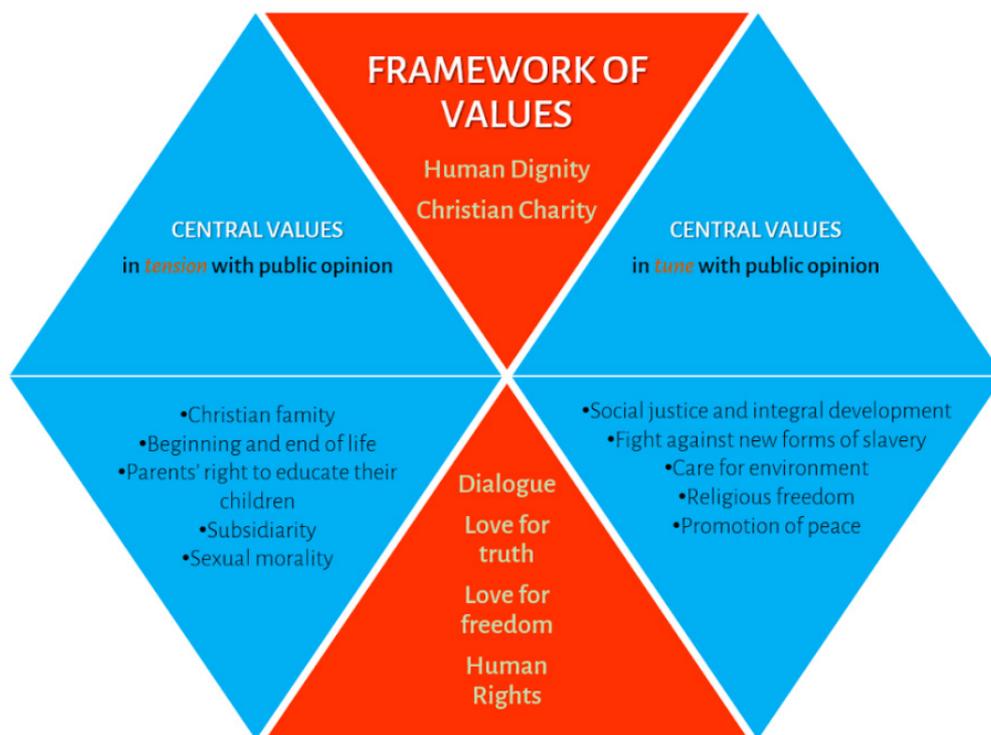
Nevertheless, since social knowledge and social expectations include today negative prejudice against speakers of Christian identity, such speakers can end up being considered as potential aggressors. The absence of a shared framework puts the adequate reception of the message in jeopardy, for not understanding the paradigm of the speaker.

4) Interpretational framework and the public forum

Linguist George Lakoff has explained that public conversation functions by frames and metaphors, and that the main proposal of a social message is the framework. Every particular topic and every discussion in the concrete develop in a context that determines

the general position of the participants vis-à-vis the topic, conditioning the feasibility of dialogue. It is therefore necessary to ask, when speaking on a given topic, whether the framework is a shared one, or whether one accepts the interlocutor's, or whether one proposes a new one.

The process of positively sharing Christian values at the service of the common good can be done at different levels. First, there is a general framework of values (charity, human dignity, love for truth, freedom), and then a collection of Christian values more in the concrete, some of which are on the same wavelength as modern society's and others in tension with the sensitivities of the majority. The figure below is based on the Doctrinal note "*on some questions regarding the commitment and behavior of Catholics in political life*"¹³¹ shows this triple classification: framework values, central values *in tension*, central values *in tune*. Those "in tune" are often not interpreted as Christian, because their generalization has transformed them into values perceived as belonging to all; nevertheless they form a central part of the proposals of the Gospel (for instance the care of creation, the fight against new forms of slavery, social justice or the promotion of peace). These values boost the shared "general framework" On the other hand, "values in tension" may seem or may in fact be received as being in contradiction with the general framework.



@JuanCannata – Valores y discurso público, Austral Comunicación, V3, N1, Junio 2014.
 #Card.Ratzinger – Doctrinal note on some questions regarding the commitment and behavior of Catholics in political life, November 2002.

It is also possible to distinguish levels as regards the addressees: certain milieus find it difficult to appreciate some Church proposed values: for some it will be social justice; for others, pre-natal life; and of late, according to some recent opinion polls, those having to do with divorce or contraception.

Given the complexity, a communication of proposals should put the expression “general framework of values” in first place, proceeding to the next level only when the first one is assured. In a situation of positive communication, such as a talk to parents in a school, or in a papal audience, the “general framework” is assured, and the “values in tension” are interpreted from that framework. Along this line, Pope Francis suggests: Let us find the way of communicating Jesus that corresponds to our present-day situation.”

To acknowledge this process we must realize that when controversial subjects are tackled, where a prejudice against the Church can be detected, to express oneself skillfully is a complex affair, not only due to the difficulty to enunciate the message itself but also because of the risk of how the message will be received: it is enough to remember the polemic raised in the whole world after Pope Benedict’s speech on Islam at Regensburg.

A greater challenge is offered by press conferences or other situations open to the public. In some of them it is enough to speak within the “general framework”, which is a good achievement already. As Juan Manuel Mora puts it, “Communication consists precisely in making explicit what is implicit, through words and deeds”. Christian identity should be made explicit as a *symphony*, not as a string of isolated elements. The first aim of a speaker on behalf of an institution of Christian identity, in other words, is to express values in the general framework.

The project Catholic Voices^[4] developed a method to facilitate understanding: first level, find the shared value underlying the criticism; second level, understand the criticism itself. Thus, one develops the argument starting from the shared value.

Every situation of communication includes intrinsic aims. When the situation allows the explicit expression of one’s framework of values (level 1) it is possible to offer some specific items “in tension” (level 2) reasonably expecting their being adequately understood. Even though at times it will not be possible to avoid strain for not finding shared basic values, it is always possible to introduce elements that facilitate a positive interpretation, by offering, in words and deeds, a clear and honest message on one’s position, and a framework of mutual respect.

Frank Luntz insists, “It doesn’t matter what you say, but what people hear”. Communication improves when it is based on this law of reception and placed on the following paradigm: the important thing is what remains in the minds and hearts of the audience. In certain debates, the lack of an adequate framework can cause the message to be heard in the opposite sense (the doctrine of the Church regarding fertilization *in vitro* or same-sex marriages can be *heard* as discriminatory). On the other hand, an event celebrating the engagement of a couple in St Peter’s Square on St Valentine’s Day assures a positive context to promote love that does not intend to be provisional.

At the same time, there is a relation between the speaker and the message. Different situations of communication demand different qualities and abilities to skillfully communicate the “symphony of truth”: the greater the public impact of the debate in which one participates, the higher ought to be the knowledge and rhetoric of the speaker, and the more important his biography and social position.

In synthesis, on preparing the communication of a given value, the starting point ought to

be: first adequately defining the situation of enunciation, second, getting it right in preparing and expressing the public discourse and third, relying on the legitimacy of the speaker.



5) The framework of values as the main message

As already said, to communicate the symphony of truth in the new social scenario one needs to concentrate one's efforts towards assuring the expression of the general framework of values. Questions about the framework are not obvious or secondary, but fundamental. Without the ample framework of the Christian ethos, the music may be perceived as ideological partiality, sectorial isolation or fallacy.

The framework is the bridge that connects with today's culture; it is the raw material to intertwine a new shared "cultural matrix": charity towards all and before all, especially towards those in difficult circumstances. This is the condition of credibility so that what is offered about values "in tension" can be perceived as service. The principle of gradualness in social processes is thus respected.

Many of the great gestures of Pope Francis, for instance, serve to reconstruct the common frame, offering to pass from the *field hospital* to the *community hospital*, for in the community there are already shared links, personal relations on which to lay the dialogue about the controversial topics without risk of misunderstanding: the common background music allows paying attention to some fragments or instruments, because they are heard within the harmony of the whole.

After expressing one's frame, one can converse about other values and proposals. Having secured the bridge, it is possible to cross the river. That's why constructing the bridge comes first. The bridge is also constructed by working on topics linked with values "in tune" with present-day society. Also, when certain values "in tension" are placed in another frame, they may change status and become part of the common frame, as when the Pope asks to struggle for the rights of children soldiers, of those who spend their day in the streets or are victims of the slave trade, or of those still in the womb of their mothers.

Two more considerations are in order. This "symphonic truth" is a sustainable public position, a discursive "meta-frame", which makes it possible to share in the conversation by contributing one's values while constructing a society for all. Hence, the more negatively a context is judged, whether social, ideological or time-wise, the more important it is to communicate the "framework of values" and "values in tune", so as to make it possible to tackle the "values in tension" informed in charity and in the dialogic spirit of the symphony. In a simple formula, we could say that a positive coefficient of communication of Christian identity is akin to communicating the shared framework on the context, speech and action of values "in tune" minus the speech and action of "values in tension".

CHRISTIAN IDENTITY

Framework of values

$$= \frac{\text{Context} \cdot (\text{discourse\&actions } Vintune - \text{discourse\&actions } Vintension)}{\quad}$$

Finally, the "symphony of truth" is better interpreted if the orchestra has an abundance of players and instruments: even though the soloist may be great, his being alone restricts the possibilities of melodic expression. A natural conclusion is to construct choirs of voices, networks of participation and expression. The wealth of the Christian message is expressed in a diversity of nuances, countenances, history, spiritualities, and perspectives: bringing in others and joining others, working in teams, widening the frame of expression.

To communicate is a human act, which engenders a community. An open, dialoguing, respectful and sincere communication builds up open, dialoguing, respectful and sincere communities. An aggressive, close and distant communication builds up a close and distant community. A communication imbued with charity founds a more Christian community.

SIX KEYS TO COMMUNICATE VALUES

- **Constructing a common framework:** by action, communication, projects and relations, make explicit and communicate the institutional key ideas (vision and mission) effectively transforming it into a culture of the organization, to make it influence initiatives, daily practice, criteria for decisions and reference paradigms.
- **Promote dialogue and open relations:** dialogue guarantees coexistence in a plural society. It is a situation of communication based on agreeing about mutual respect. Thus respect (primacy of charity, authenticity, solidarity) becomes the music of the organization, not on paper but in daily reality.
- **Propose one's convictions starting from common values:** to base communication on what is shared implies making an effort to delve into one's identity so as to discover the right words; it begins by listening carefully, and goes together with the clarity and relevance of the message.
- **Let others join, join others:** open and wide relations develop by sharing projects and hopes, favouring bonds of solidarity and a communal proactive role.
- **Collaborate in solving the social problems of one's environment:** the identity of an educational institution of Christian inspiration shows in the attention to the milieu and its contribution to issues that demand collective action, such as the eradication of poverty, the promotion of work for the youth, the struggle against forms of violence among adolescents such as bullying, avoiding a narrow and self-referencing agenda.
- **Empower one's enunciating legitimacy:** one's personal biography and social position give legitimacy to a public voice. Coherence between communication and action, as well as the ability to empathize, are determining elements in legitimating bearers of values. Every public has its scale of values and we can understand why the anti-abortion declarations of Mother Teresa of Calcutta, George W. Bush, Justin Bieber or Jack Nicholson were received differently, despite the fact that the speakers used similar words.

[1] See the homonymous book by Elisabeth Noelle-Neuman.

[2] This von Balthasar's expression has been used by the last three popes. "Unity, as well as truth, is symphonic. The Council pointed it out. Faith, as seen at Pentecost where the apostles speak all languages, is a symphony: plurality in unity" (Ratzinger, *Zenit*, 30-11-02). "Let us cooperate together in truth, which we know to be one and symphonic. It demands of each of us a constant commitment to convert to the only Lord" (Benedict XVI, Homily 29-06-12). "To use an image, we can compare the cosmos to a book, in Galileo's words, and consider it as the work of an Author expressing himself in the "symphony" of creation. Within this symphony there appears at times a "solo", instrumental or vocal, so important as to define the meaning of the whole work. This "solo" is Jesus." (Benedict XVI *Verbum Domini* 13). "The Church was born catholic, i.e. symphonic from the beginning, and cannot not be catholic, designed as it is to evangelization and to meet all" (Francis, Audience 17-9-14).

[3] Card Ratzinger 2002.

[4] Promoted by Jack Valero and Austen Ivereigh, on the occasion of the visit of Pope

Benedict to the U.K. in 2010. See www.catholicvoices.org.uk. See also Valero & Ivereigh, *Who Know Where They Stand”: Catholic Voices and the Papal Visit to the UK*.