

Archbishop John Patrick Foley

How to Raise Your Children in the Age of the Media

By Barbara Middleton

Archbishop John Foley is an American who heads the Vatican office in charge of all media matters, called the Council for Social Communications. We all know that the media contains all sorts of information and imagery that can be harmful, and we asked the archbishop to talk with us about how parents can raise their children in such a world.

—The Editor

Archbishop Foley, what advice do you have for Catholic families trying to raise children in the “media age”?

ARCHBISHOP JOHN PATRICK FOLEY: Of course, the traditional words of advice: good example in the home, daily prayer, forming children in prayer.

But in regards to media, I would think it would be best to not have radio or television on during the evening meal. First of all, to get everybody *together* for the evening meal, and to not have radio or television on at that time and to discuss what everyone has done during the day. Then to make sure that the programs you watch at home are good programs, with good content, and if you have cable television — certainly don't subscribe to any channel which would have objectionable content.

Then, I would say I would have parents assign their children to see certain programs and then to get them to discuss the content of those programs together, because there are some very good programs on, but there's also a lot of trash on television. I would also think it would be good for parents to make sure their children *read*, and that can be done in cooperation with the schools.

I also think it's important for parents to encourage media education classes in schools — schools have classes about literature, why don't they have classes about radio and television? How radio and television programs are put together,



U.S. Archbishop John P. Foley, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, greets Pope Benedict XVI during an audience in the Vatican

(CNS photo)

news programs and dramatic programs, and how they are written. To have critical analysis of such programming so that the young people will be critical — *constructively* critical — consumers of the media and not merely couch potatoes.

What are your biggest concerns in terms of how the media are affecting society?

J. PATRICK FOLEY: First of all I think our commercial media in the United States encourage people to be consumers. Merely consumers. I think that's dangerous because it gives people a materialistic philosophy. I'm not against commercial media but I think commercial media should be regulated by the Federal Communications Commission, certainly in the number of minutes they can devote to commercial announcements, and then to the requirement for public service time which would also include religious programming.

I think that materialism and secularism, as our present Holy Father, Benedict XVI, has warned us, can be fostered in many ways

by commercial radio and television.

How does your office keep up to date with media technology and how is the Church using this new technology to reach the people through the media?

J. PATRICK FOLEY: It's interesting to note that the Church was the first to use movable type in regard to Gutenberg's Bible, so that was a real breakthrough several hundred years ago. Then you have the fact that Marconi, the inventor of radio, started Vatican Radio, so we were in at the beginning there. The Vatican was one of the first 13 signatories of the Itelsat Treaty for television.

The Vatican actually had television capability before Italy did, but it wasn't able to use it because there was nobody able to receive the programming. That was before satellite, but now the Vatican has its own TV center which



is able to transmit programming all over the world. We saw that with the death and funeral of Pope John Paul II. And the election and inauguration of Pope Benedict XVI. We have *L'Osservatore Romano*, the Vatican's newspaper, with its very valuable weekly editions in various languages, which is a very helpful documentation service. I know I personally filed to get the Vatican domain for internet

which is "dot VA" and the people who control the internet wanted to give us "dot IT," for Italy, and I said, "We're not in Italy, we're an independent country," and they said what about "dot org?" I said, "We are an organization but we're more than just an organization, we're a Church that also happens to be a *country* — the only Church that happens to be a country." So we finally got "dot VA" and the importance of that is that anything that comes from "dot VA" you can be assured is authentic. Because there are a lot of people who use domain names like "Catholic" or even "Vatican" and they're not authentic, they even put pornography under those names, but if you see "dot VA" domain, you know it's authentic. I thought that was extremely important for the Church.

We also started — even before internet — the Information Network for the Church in Latin America. This is a network of computers throughout Latin America, to be a source of unity for the Church in that continent with the Holy See in Rome. And of course, we promote Catholic communications activity around the world. A lot of people in the United States don't know that the largest radio network in Portugal is Catholic, which helped to prevent a Communist takeover in Portugal in the 1970s. The second largest radio network in Spain is Catholic, the largest television station in Chile is Catholic and you have five Catholic television networks in Brazil and three of them national — two regional. You have 44 Catholic radio stations in the Philippines. So I think we could go on and on with examples of what the Church is doing in communications around the world, and the Church in the United States is not the leader in that area.

How important is it for the Vatican to be involved in media issues in terms of standing up against the Culture of Death?

J. PATRICK FOLEY: Of course we try to work to have moral regulation of the media. For example, we cooperate with the United States Conference of Bishops in their appeals to the FCC to require more public service broadcasting which would include religious broadcasting, and more free time for religious broadcasting — that has been done away with in the "de-regulation" of the media, so you have a growing concentration of ownership and you have a diminishing requirement for those who are active in the media, and that's tragic because the airwaves are a public trust, they are basically, *radically* the property of all of the people, and licenses are given to people to use for the common good, and I would say they are entitled to make a living, not entitled to make a killing, so that they should use these responsibly and use them to serve the common good. Also, the FCC should be concerned about making sure that the public welfare is protected.

In terms of using the mass media to evangelize, what can we learn from the writings of John Paul II?

J. PATRICK FOLEY: Well, the last Apostolic Letter he wrote was on communications, called *The Rapid Development*. I would hope that many people would study that particular apostolic letter and learn what he has offered us as a challenge in how to use communications better in the service of the Church and of the Truth. That was overlooked by a number of people because it came out in February 2005, between his two hospitalizations. In 2004, he told me he wanted to do something on this and asked me when it would be a good time, and I said, "Before our plenary meeting." The plenary meeting for the Pontifical Council for Social Communications was at the beginning of March, so this came out in February 2005, specifically on communications — the last major document Pope John Paul II wrote. I was pleasantly surprised to receive it, to think that he would have this on his mind amidst his illness. I have the original copy signed by him and the preparatory texts with his own corrections, so they're precious relics of a truly great Pope. It's important to note that in all the documents our council has done, we emphasize three principles. First, communications media should always tell the truth. Second, they should respect the dignity of the human person, and this excludes pornography, which involves the exploitation of the human person and not respecting the dignity of the human person. And the third is that the communications media should serve the common good.

One last question. John Paul II was instrumental in launching the Vatican website. Has this been a useful tool not only for clergy and for Catholics around the world, but for others interested in learning about the Catholic faith?

J. PATRICK FOLEY: Yes, of course. As I said, you are guaranteed to get authentic information from the Vatican website. They haven't put the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* on the website because of problems with copyright which we are still trying to overcome for some strange reason. I think that would be helpful to have on the website. There are many things on the website which are of great use.

I think it's more important for local bishops' conferences and local dioceses to put material on their websites and encourage intercommunication, because obviously here at the Vatican, it's impossible for us to deal with the avalanche of e-mail that arrives from around the world.

So it's very important for local dioceses and national bishops' conferences to be able to offer things, and be able to respond on a local level to these legitimate inquiries of so many people. Because the Church is basically local, and when people respond to the truth about Jesus Christ, they're also hoping to become members of a community of believers.

So while it's important that we have material, authentic information here, for people who may be isolated — which could be in countries not hospitable to the preaching of the Gospel — it's also important that individuals who do live near a community of faith be able to be integrated into that faith community so that they may be able to be sustained in their spiritual pilgrimage. ●

*Barbara Middleton heads
Trinity Apostolate in Detroit, Michigan.*