

**Presentation at Bethlehem University of the Holy Land**  
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**Doctor of Humanities, *Honoris Causa***

**Communication as Challenge**  
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Your Excellency Mons. Pietro Sambì, Nuncio and Chancellor of this University, Mr. Hanna Nasser, Chair of the Board of Trustees, Dear Brother Vincent, President, Distinguished Trustee and Regents, Faculty, Staff, Students and Guests.

I am greatly honored to receive this honorary degree from Bethlehem University and thank the Board of Trustees for this gracious endorsement. In my long years of teaching at the Pontifical Biblical Institute in Rome and later during the twenty-three years of my service as Bishop of Milan, I always asked not to be endorsed by any kind of honorary degree, remembering the words of the Gospel: “Woe to you, when all men speak well of you” (Lk 6,26), and remembering also the admonition given to those who like to be praised in public: “Truly, I say to you, they have their reward” they should not expect the reward of the Father who sees in secret (cfr. Mt 6, 1.2.4.) Further, it is said: “Do not let your left hand know what your right is doing) (Mt 6,3)

But here today things are different. This honor comes to me from an institution which has a primary role in promoting peace and human rights in this land, from an institution which recently has been described as a “wonderful university” by American and European bishops; from an institution whose story is one of remarkable perseverance, in spite of many problems and difficulties; from an institution where Christian and Muslim students come together from diversified backgrounds and learn to live and study together. This institution is inspired by the courage and commitment of faculty, staff and students; and finally many look to her as a beacon of hope for the necessary continuation of a presence of Christian families in the Holy Land.

It is therefore with great joy that I accept this honor. And now let me try to say a few words on a subject which is strictly connected with the work of this University and was also connected with my particular work as the Bishop of Milan, and this is the subject of communication.

I will start with a personal story. When, twenty years ago, I started to write a pastoral letter to the diocese on communication, all began easily. The words flowed effortlessly from my pen. I said to myself: How beautiful it is to communicate and how simple! It is enough to say what you have in mind! But then I asked several professional people to read the first draft. They showed appreciation, but at the same time they communicated hundreds of useful observations (delete this, add that, underline this other point, clarify one paragraph, rewrite another). So then I said to myself: How difficult it is to communicate! What a hard challenge it is to have good communication.

And if this is true for the simplest form of communication, that is intellectual communication, what should be said of the difficulty of interpersonal communication, where there is question of feelings, emotions, false presuppositions and misunderstandings?

Communication is good and beautiful because it comes from God, who is himself communication and who gives us himself in order for us to know he loves us. But communication is difficult because it happens among human beings with all the weight of historical and personal faults. Many people feel that they are not at peace even with themselves and that they are unable adequately to express their feelings. In families, for example, the struggle to communicate is so proverbial that we label as happy exceptions those couples or those parents who say they don't have problems in this regard. In many cases communication seems totally blocked: these are the cases that end in divorce or, at least, in the collapse of conjugal life. In all societies, the daily overload of hostility, frequently exacerbated by social and political injustice and strongly supported by mass communication, has reached levels that seem to indicate for almost all countries of this world a kind of "social neurosis", or even in some cases "social psychosis"

What are the root difficulties in human communication? What can help us to confront this challenge, to communicate well?

I would suggest first of all that we have to overcome a false idea of human communication. Such a false vision does not err by defect, that is through an incomplete ideal of communication. Rather, it errs from excess: It desires too much, it wants what human communication cannot give. We want everything right now, we would like to master, to possess, to dominate the other. It would be interesting to analyze this "greed for possession" as the fruit of that "instrumental rationality" typical of our modern age that identifies knowledge with power. Every sort of instrumentalization and enslavement of the other can flow from it. St. Augustine, the great Father of the Church, says: "Two things kill the soul: despair and false hope". This is also true of communication: A false hope of somehow absorbing the other person, making him or her perfectly homogenous with oneself, leads us to despair of ever communicating in an authentic way.

But there is a communication which is stronger than this failed communication. We live in the region of the world where the three great monotheistic religions were born; the faithful of these three religions are "peoples of the book". These books containing the word of God are the way God has entered into dialogue with humans. God has created and has impressed in each one of us the desire of a true exchange of mind and heart. Let us then consider how God has communicated with humanity in order to understand the beauty and the challenge of true communication. I am a Christian and therefore do this by pointing to what we call the Bible. For Muslims I would hope that this makes some sense and touches their understanding of the Koran. From its very first page, the Bible is a history of divine communication with humanity. We therefore consider some constants of divine self-communication as it appears in this salvation history, in order to deduce from it some of the characteristics of authentic human communication. I shall briefly mention five theses:

1. Divine communication to humanity is *progressive, cumulative, and historic*. Thus it does not take place in a single instant, but it involves different times and circumstances that must be understood and read as a whole. God's communication with humanity happens through words and events that are mutually referential and explain one another.
2. Divine communication in history occurs in a *dialectic* of revelation and hiddenness. It is not a procession "from glory to glory", a crescendo of light without shadow. It is rather an unfolding of events, some luminous, others enigmatic. God reveals himself also in the shadow and that requires that we accept the first hints of his presence. That is, I think, one of the reasons why Jesus spoke in parables: Too much communication cancels out, annihilates the other. Every true communication is gradual, prudent and respectful of the audience.
3. Divine communication entails *self-sacrifice and renunciation*. This is especially visible in the passion and death of Jesus, but is true of every act of true communication. We cannot give without renouncing something, we cannot expect always to win, but we have to loose and to risk in order to gain the confidence of the other. For this Jesus said: "The son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and give his life for the redemption of others." (Mk 10,45).
4. Divine self-communication is never complete *here on earth*. Only in eternal life will we know as we are known and will we see God as he is (1 Cor 13, 12; 1 Jn 3,2). Also in human communication we can never know another completely. There is always a "secret", a mysterious reserve, a threshold that is impossible – and even useless – to cross.
5. Divine self-communication is *interpersonal*. With unspeakable love, God communicates not only something about himself, but his very self. At the same time, divine self-communication is interpersonal. It calls out to the other, to the person who receives it. Without reciprocity, there is no communication.
6. Divine self-Communication is *courageous and undaunted*. It does not fear rejection nor refusal, neither becomes discouraged by failure. God gives himself with sincere love again and again, without considering the poor response of us human beings. We can say about communication what Paul says about Love: communication "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things" (cfr 1 Cor 13,7).

These constants of divine communication allow us to consider some characteristics of inter-human communication.

1. First of all, communication *takes time*, as God himself took time to communicate himself. No one can communicate everything all at once, hastily and gracelessly. But when we try to communicate all at once, we often find ourselves lacking attention, and being superficial.

2. We need not be terrified by moments of *shadow*. A person who always and everywhere desires light, clarity and absolute certainty really wants to dominate more than to communicate, falls prey to jealousy, and is alienated from others, even when apparently vanquishing them.
3. In order to communicate we have to be open to some *renunciation* and ready to give up something which is dear to us. Without giving up what one possesses there is no true understanding.
4. Here on earth, the communicative *transparency* we can attain is never absolute. The desire to force it beyond its proper limits, beyond the boundaries of what has to remain secret, leads to failure. I wonder if sometimes in religious groups a kind of self-communication is practiced that does not respect privacy of the individuals. Not everything that is personal and private can be communicated to others in public. Modesty, reserve and respect are guarantees of true friendship.
5. Communication always *engages* the person who communicates. The one who speaks in some way or other reveals something about himself or herself, expressing his or her fundamental honesty (or dishonesty) and his or her openness (or closure) to others and to the world. Happy are those who are able to give themselves in true communication.
6. Communication requires the courage to *risk* the refusal or the inattention of the other and the *perseverance* to try again and again to communicate. This continuous effort is based on the hope that every man and woman have in the depth of their heart a profound desire to enter into a real dialogue with other human beings and that this desire entails a greed for reconciliation and peace.

We derive from this that human communication is in constant need of human, psychological healing and of the healing grace of God. This is true at the level of ordinary life, but becomes a heavy challenge where social and political communication is at stake. Here a great effort of honesty and justice is required. Every injustice is a block on the road to communication. This emphasizes the great importance of education to achieve the goals of good interpersonal communication and also in order to remove the blocks on the road to dialogue and peace. For this I am grateful to this University which gives witness to the basic principle of human rights and to specific religious beliefs that decisively contribute to mutual understanding.

I am sure you have, are now doing and will continue both to foster healthy human inter-communication and help overcome injustice and violence, in order to prepare the actors of a new world in which justice and peace are given to all peoples.

For this very important work and for the honor which is bestowed upon me I again thank all the faculty, staff and students and wish to all of you the joy of true and sincere communication.

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