

Understanding McLuhan

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God does certain things that are so outrageous they change our very way of thinking about issues and answers we might have considered were tidily in place. Paul's sudden conversion terrified the Jews; it was as if Mao were to arrive on the chancery doorstep and ask for preaching papers. And a Communist made the beautiful religious film, *The Gospel According to Saint Matthew*.

Marshall McLuhan's so-called "outrageous" book, *Understanding Media*, may have been given to us to understand Vatican II more clearly. For example, his chapter on clothing can give us insight into the much-publicized problem of what to do with religious habits in the 20th century; his theories of "explosion" and "implosion" give us insight into the kind of rapid changes our world is undergoing, as suggested in Schema 13; his remarks on "hot" and "cool" media relate directly to the Document on the Liturgy and the scriptural renewal by helping us to understand why there has been so little scriptural and liturgical involvement in past decades. Most of all, however, his famous dictum, "the medium is the message," can give us insight both as preachers and as theologians. Let me explain why I think this is so.

With regard to preaching, it is possible to understand that we may have tended to split the medium from the message in the past. We have laid stress on *what* is being preached rather than *how* it is being preached, or even now, *that* it is being preached. As an example of the new emphasis, in a Dominican homiletics class last year, the students asked what the people would be looking for in the pulpit when the students began to preach after their ordination to the diaconate. "They will be looking for you!" was the reply. Precisely. Not so much a body of information, nor even great forensic tricks that past orators have been famous for, but *they will be looking for you*—for a deacon or priest fully convinced that what he is saying is true, that it is his

experience that it is true, and that he cannot but tell it to those who have ears to hear. This is perhaps a new idea in preaching (actually, the renewal of a notion that began with Saint Paul himself), and in some ways difficult to understand. Wittingly or unwittingly, however, McLuhan can help us to understand what it means by his having expressed the same idea in different terms—"the medium is the message." If the penny drops or the light dawns here, then surely it will be easier to grasp the idea that the preacher *is* the sermon.

A similar situation occurs in the Council's Document on Revelation, where the Lord Jesus Christ is reaffirmed as the *res revelata*. The Council Fathers make the point scripturally, as they cite the opening lines of the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Then, after speaking in many and varied ways through the prophets, now at last in these days God has spoken to us in his son. (Heb. 1:1-2)

Note "*in*" his Son, rather than "through" his Son or "by means of" his Son. We are called to understand that the perfect revelation of God is primarily a person rather than a body of information that comes through a person. Jesus is the revelation of the Father. But heretofore we have been accustomed to think of revelation primarily as a body of written scripture or doctrine; the notion of revelation as a person may catch us off guard. Here again, however, (as in the case of the preacher being the sermon he preaches), McLuhan has inadvertently furnished us with a model for our understanding, namely, that "the medium is the message." The expression can predispose us to think in a new way, and in a way that will help us to understand this central point of *Dei Verbum* even more fully.

In fact, dynamic interaction of *Understanding Media* and the Council documents is almost unlimited. For example, McLuhan's observations juxtaposed to Schema 13 give us fresh insight into people of God and the popularity of the "anti-hero"—a people that has forgotten how to play in its consuming desire to work. In a Teilhardian vein, we may respond to McLuhan's images of tribalization and implosive "togetherness" as an image of what Father Rienhold calls "the spiral to the parousia." And here at last is perhaps a man who can describe the Pentecost event in a way that will be meaningful to our own day—the slow disintegration of Babel, each of us talking to one another in foreign tongues, when "young men shall see visions and old men shall dream dreams." (Joel 3:1-5)

In a word, McLuhan's *Understanding Media* forces us to change our way of thinking, to see things in an altered context and from a different point of view. But I think this is precisely what the Council Fathers have asked us to do as well, to find new ways of expressing eternal truths.* In the end, it is a question of understanding: understanding the Church, the Council, understanding McLuhan and his media. But a clue to this "understanding" might come from Sister Mary Corita, who puts it this way in one of her serigraphs:

To understand is to stand under something, to put ourselves below it and look up: standing under is a good way to understand.

In this sense, understanding may be the beginning of wisdom. Even understanding McLuhan.

FOOTNOTE

* Pope John to the Council Fathers: "the substance of the ancient doctrine of the deposit of faith is one thing, and the way in which it is presented is another. And it is the latter that must be taken into great consideration, with patience if necessary . . ."

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