

TELEVISION AND THE FAMILY: GUIDELINES FOR GOOD VIEWING

Pope John Paul II

Holy Father's message for 1994 World Communications Day, which is observed May 15.

Dear brothers and sisters,

In recent decades, television has spearheaded a communications revolution which has profoundly affected family life. Today television is a primary source of news, information and entertainment for countless families, shaping their attitudes and opinions, their values and patterns of behavior.

Television can enrich family life. It can draw family members closer together and foster their solidarity with other families and with the community at large. It can increase not only their general knowledge but also their religious knowledge, making it possible for them to hear God's word, to strengthen their religious identity and to nurture their moral and spiritual life.

Television can also harm family life: by propagating degrading values and models of behavior; by broadcasting pornography and graphic depictions of brutal violence; by inculcating moral relativism and religious skepticism; by spreading distorted, manipulative accounts of news events and current issues; by carrying exploitative advertising that appeals to base instincts, and by glorifying false visions of life that obstruct the realization of mutual respect, of justice and of peace.

Even when television programs themselves are not morally objectionable, television can still have negative effects on the family. It can isolate family members in their private worlds, cutting them off from authentic interpersonal relations; it can also divide the family by alienating parents from children and children from parents.

Because the moral and spiritual renewal of the human family as a whole must be rooted in the authentic renewal of individual families, the theme for the 1994 World Communications Day— "Television and the Family: Guidelines for Good Viewing"—is especially timely, particularly during this International Year of the Family, when the world community is seeking ways to strengthen family life.

In this message, I wish especially to highlight the responsibilities of parents, of the men and women of the television industry, of public authorities, and of those with pastoral and educational duties in the church. In their hands lies the power to make television an ever more effective medium in helping families to fulfill their roles as a force for moral and social renewal.

God has entrusted parents with the grave responsibility of helping their children "to seek the truth from their earliest years and to live in conformity with the truth, to seek the good and promote it" (Message for the 1991 World Day of Peace, No. 3) It is therefore their duty to lead their children to appreciate "whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious" (Phil 4:8).

Thus, besides being discriminating television viewers themselves, parents should actively help to form in their children viewing habits conducive to sound development, human, moral and religious. Parents should inform themselves in advance about program content and make a conscious choice on that basis for the good of the family—to watch or not to watch. Reviews and evaluations provided by religious agencies and other responsible groups—together with sound media education programs—can be helpful in this regard. Parents should also discuss television with their children, guiding them to regulate the amount and quality of their viewing, and to perceive and judge the ethical values underlying particular programs, because the family is "the privileged means for transmitting the religious and cultural values which help the person to acquire his or her own identity" (Message for the 1994 World Day of Peace, No. 2).

Forming children's viewing habits will sometimes mean simply turning off the television set: because there are better things to do, because consideration for other family members requires it, or because indiscriminate television viewing can be harmful.

Parents who make regular, prolonged use of television as a kind of electronic baby sitter surrender their role as the primary educators of their children. Such dependence on television can deprive family members of opportunities to interact with one another through conversation, shared activities and common prayer. Wise parents are also aware that even good programs should be supplemented by other sources of news, entertainment, education and culture.

To guarantee that the television industry will safeguard the rights of the family, parents should express their legitimate concerns to media managers and producers. Sometimes they will find it useful to join with others in associations which represent their interests in relation to the media, to sponsors and advertisers, and to public authorities.

Television personnel—executives and managers, producers and directors, writers and researchers, journalists, on-camera performers and technical workers—all have serious moral responsibilities to the families that make up such a large part of their audience. In their professional and personal lives, those who work in television should be committed to the family as society's basic community of life, love and solidarity.

Recognizing the influence of the medium in which they work, they should promote sound moral and spiritual values, and avoid "anything that could harm the family in its existence, its stability, its balance and its happiness," including "eroticism or violence, the defense of divorce or of antisocial attitudes among young people" (Paul VI, Message for the 1969 World Communications Day, No. 2.)

Television is often required to deal with serious themes: with human weakness and sin, and their consequences for individuals and society; with the failings of social institutions, including government and religion; with weighty questions about the meaning of life. It should treat these subjects responsibly—without sensationalism and with a sincere concern for the good of society, as well as with scrupulous regard for the truth. "The truth shall make you free" (Jn 8:32), Jesus said, and ultimately all truth has its foundation in God, who is also the source of our freedom and creativity.

In fulfilling its public responsibilities, the television industry should develop and observe a code of ethics which includes a commitment to serving the needs of families and to promoting values supportive of family life. Media councils, with members from both the industry and the general public, are also a highly desirable way of making television more responsive to the needs and values of its audiences.

Whether television channels are under public or private management, they represent a public trust for the service of the common good; they are not the mere private preserve of commercial interests or an instrument of power or propaganda for social, economic or political elites; they exist to serve the well-being of society as a whole.

Thus, as the fundamental "cell" of society, the family deserves to be assisted and defended by appropriate measures of the state and other institutions (cf. Message for the 1994 World Day of Peace, No. 5). This points to certain responsibilities on the part of public authorities where television is concerned.

Recognizing the importance of a free exchange of ideas and information, the church supports freedom of speech and of the press (cf. "Gaudium et Spes," 59). At the same time, she insists that "the rights of individuals, families and society itself to privacy, public decency and the protection of basic values" demand to be respected (Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "Pornography and Violence in the Media: A Pastoral Response," No. 21). Public authorities are invited to set and enforce reasonable ethical standards for programming which will foster the human and religious values on which family life is built, and will discourage

whatever is harmful. They should also encourage dialogue between the television industry and the public, providing structures and forums to make this possible.

Church-related agencies, for their part, render an excellent service to families by offering them media education and film and program evaluation. Where resources permit, church communications agencies can also help families by producing and disseminating family-oriented programming, or by promoting such programming. Episcopal conferences and dioceses should consistently make the "family dimension" of television part of their pastoral planning for communications (cf.

Pontifical Council for Social Communications, "Aetatis Novae," 21- 23).

Since television professionals are engaged in presenting a vision of life to a vast audience, which includes children and young people, they can profit from the pastoral ministry of the church, which can help them to appreciate those ethical and religious principles which give full meaning to human and family life.

"Typically, pastoral programs of this sort should include ongoing formation which will help these men and women—many of whom sincerely wish to know and to do what is ethically and morally right—to integrate moral norms ever more fully into their professional work as well as their private lives" (ibid., 19).

The family, founded on marriage, is a unique communion of persons which God has made the "natural and fundamental group unit of society" (Universal Declaration of Human Rights, art. 16, 3). Television and the other communications media have immense power to sustain and strengthen such communion within the family, as well as solidarity with other families and a spirit of service to society. Grateful for the contribution to such communion within the family and among families which television as a communications medium has made and can make, the church—herself a communion in the truth and love of Jesus Christ, the Word of God—takes the occasion of World Communications Day 1994 to encourage families themselves, media personnel and public authorities to realize to the full their noble calling to strengthen and promote society's first and most vital community, the family.