

# Christian Telecasts and their Impact on Communal Life

Edith Slembek

(edith.slembek@bluewin.ch)

Much is said on radio and television about public matters, about politics, the economy, and education. The same holds true for churches. Their representatives hold religious services for their congregations, teach religion, speak at private ceremonies (baptism, wedding, funerals), and offer spiritual guidance. The churches sponsor nursery schools and hospitals and provide care and support for children and the elderly and ill – but always, their mission is to spread their religious views and messages. They perform social work, debate current problems, justify and defend their own positions. In these activities, they communicate their worldview and the different meaning it holds for a diversity of people. How do they succeed, are they being heard? Are they credible? Are their listeners changing anything, not only in their beliefs, but also in their own lives, their social interactions? The aim of Christian communication is to make a matter into a common cause in order be able to act on it together (cp. Geissner, 2000).

In some situations, church members hush up something and only talk when the media awakens the interest of the public; but will they then also take actions? In reality, even their silence is a form of communication. Each of their public comments requests a different attitude, different arguments, or at least different verbalizations of the arguments - different examples. The question should be, if they succeed. If they succeed - this relates to a specific situation where church representatives make public appearances on Swiss television in *Thoughts for Sunday*.

The churches also express themselves in the media radio and television. On television governed by public law<sup>1</sup> the *Thoughts for Sunday* is a four-to-five minute telecast with the mission of giving testimonials from today's Christians. Christian theologians address social topics and problems of daily life, while trying to affiliate their viewpoint with the Christian message. Drawing from their wealth of practiced spirituality, they aim to provide answers and meaning. The speakers are address a broad audience who takes notice of religious topics

casually rather than in an engaged manner (Gysel/Meyer, 2003, p. 1).

The *Thoughts for Sunday* is broadcast on Saturday evenings on primetime television. During the program, the speaker is viewed in medium close shot (head, shoulders and chest), without having the benefit of a moving backdrop or a pulpit. This telecast is wedged in between the news, weather forecast, advertisements, and successive entertainment such as movies or music shows. This telecast receives high viewer ratings, but it is not clear if the viewers actually pay attention or if they use this time to provide themselves with drinks and snacks for the following shows. They often switch the channel. This happens after about one minute, when entertainment starts on commercial television. This likely indicates that there are certain topics or their development or depiction that simply do not appeal to people.

Who gives these speeches? Every eighteen months, a new group is selected to replace the previous one. The selected committee is composed of media delegates of the catholic and the reformed church, editorial staff from the TV station, and one speech teacher. In observance of the proportional representation election system, each committee must include two Catholics, two Protestants (Calvin, Zwingli), one man and one woman each. It is clear that the Protestants belong to the so-called Presbyterians. Dating back to the reformation in the 16th century, the Presbyterians - next to the Catholics - are dominant in Switzerland. They are ministers, religious education teachers, and members of protestant social services. It is easier to find suitable women here, as the Presbyterian Church has numerous female ministers. Regarding the Catholics, at first it is only certain that they are theologians and members of the Catholic Church. Their field of work, however, can be defined in different institutional contexts. There is, for instance, a male priest, a monk, and a male social worker. As choices among women, nuns, religious education teachers, congregation leaders, or theologians with therapeutic training could be considered.

Regardless of the composition of the respective group of speakers for the *Thoughts for Sunday*, I provide guidance to each of these groups with interventions on rhetorical communication. My aim is to enable them to clearly communicate their thoughts and convictions. The *Thoughts for Sunday* often focuses on current social problems (e.g., unemployment, poverty of women in their old age, exorbitant executive salaries). The subject matter can also be drawn from the meaning of special church holidays (e.g., Easter, Christmas, Lent). The topics are mostly interwoven with bible quotes and biblical parables in order to demonstrate how a comparable situation, was interpreted by Jesus or one of the evangelists 2,000 years ago. For one thing, this points out the continuity of their message: the problems of mankind are timeless, and the New Testament can serve to provide suggestions for solving them. For another thing, the comparison serves to stimulate listeners to think about their current lives, about their human relationships, about injustice in their environment. It is made clear that the messages of the Bible still are valid and can be applied to the living conditions of modern day people. It is also made clear, that the poor and underprivileged are being addressed. This leads to the question if they should really be the targeted audience, whenever change is called for. How can the “poor” be expected to change their circumstances? Or is this just an effort to pacify them? Should not these messages be addressed who have the power and the means to change social circumstances?

For Middle Europe, it holds true that numerous people have already left the church: some, because they no longer believe in God, some because they do not accept the dogmatic rules – especially those applied by the Catholic Church – and others because they do not want to pay money for the church taxes. For all these groups, it is imperative to note that they are an audience who is not particularly engaged in Christian topics. In other words, WHO lets WHO tell her or him WHAT via television? Who is ready to listen to whom?

So, how should a 5-minute speech be composed and presented? How can the speaker meet the target to speak in a manner that would appeal to anyone? Also, speeches with religious or ethical topics are always rhetorical in nature. The person who speaks wants to invite her/his listeners to really listen; s/he wants to engage their contemplation, to persuade them to perhaps try out a different course of action in the future. In other words, “the target lies with the listeners (Geissner 1998). If it is to be reached – whether this is even possible is left open – then the

speech must be adapted to their living conditions. What does this mean for the planning?” (Slembek, 2007, p. 169)

All of this is difficult to achieve in television speeches. They are not sermons; if they were, then they would conform to all the knowledge they acquired in academic studies. There, and in hands-on training, future theologians learn above all that their mission is to preach. They learn to write down the exact wording for their sermons. To preach means speaking with the congregation present in the traditional House of the Lord. This address is not possible when a dispersed audience listens and watches a television program. Other rules come into play here; there are no familiar rites, no familiar rooms, no special clothing (robes), no mood-setting organ music. What holds value for those who preach during religious services is not valid for those who administer to other tasks. They conduct dialogues, for instance, or they work with small groups, but in any case they have real and present counterparts to whom they speak and with whom they are communicating. The speakers of both groups must be prepared step-by-step for the specific conditions of a telecast; they must also be willing to become open to it. This includes pondering questions such as:

- Who is watching me? Who is listening to me? Are they younger or older people, do they live in rural areas? What moves them, what worries them? What persona do I assume when talking to them? A minister, a mother of a sick child, a social worker working with drug addicts in back-alleys, a priest?

- What is my target, when I speak now? Do I want to comfort, to cheer up, or to encourage people into taking action?

- How do I have to phrase my words, when I want to appeal in particular to one or the other target audience?

- What does it mean altogether for the theologians, who are all scribes and writers by profession, when they have to phrase their words for listening?

At first, considerations of this sort are completely alien to this group. They had no place in their studies or in their subsequent training. This aspect is another hurdle when attempting to invite people to listen via a media that is as elusive as television. Not every theologian is capable of this task. That is why casting comes into play. Casting is followed by a lengthy project that includes working

on scripts, but even more important, working on adapting the speech and the performance to television.

But the professed objective remains to take a stand, to give answers, and to convey meaning affiliated with the Christian message. But if the *Thoughts for Sunday* provide answers to the listeners, if they find some meaning for themselves therein, remains unclear. There is very little feedback. Now and then a few emails come in, expressing either agreement or strong disagreement, but that is all. I will describe three examples.

### **Impact on Public Opinion**

#### **The Social Worker Urs**

Urs used to be a monk, who was ‘seduced’ by a nun, in his own words. Both leave their convents, get married and have four children together. Consistent with the rules of the Catholic Church, he is expelled from his order. The small town where he is living now employs him as a social worker. Since then, his job is to get out into the streets and to work with drug addicts. He accepts to compose and to present the *Thoughts for Sunday* once a month for the duration of 18 months. He sticks to his role as a social worker in all of his television performances. He talks about the difficulties drug addicts face, and he campaigns for better understanding of their desolate circumstances. He mentions how he hesitates to hug a drug addict when she asks for it. Over the course of time, Urs has managed to convince the town administration to provide a meeting facility for his clients. This place features some sort of kitchen, a living room, and a play area. The drug addicts themselves are keeping it clean. This facility is threatened to be closed down now for financial reasons. Due to his television appearances, Urs has become a public person whose words are heard in town. The town administration - with the support of its citizens - at last gave up this plan, and the sanctuary and meeting place of the drug addicts will be preserved. This example of Urs shows that our work can actually bring about change. To be sure, the fact that a social worker who is initially only a small player, suddenly becomes a public figure plays a large role in this example. The question remains of how everything would have turned out, if he had only been viewed as a social worker in a small town of bourgeois character.

This question is related to my work with groups presenting the *Thoughts for Sunday*. At first, Urs appeared to me as a person who functions according to his own “chaos system.” He knows what he wants,

but he constantly mixes up “What’s next?” with “How am I feeling?” “Whom am I speaking to?” “Do they even want to know about this?” “Do they value me?” Working with him made it necessary to stabilize his self-value above all and to lead him to precisely thinking out each step in drafting his speech, to develop his thoughts along an outline, and to re-think and re-formulate his presentation anew for his listeners in each setting. This process worked out, at least for Urs.

#### **The Nun Beate**

Beate's case is different. She is a nun, approximately 50 years of age, but she already has television experience when she is selected for the *Thoughts for Sunday*: she used to announce philosophical programs in another telecast. Beate was already well known to a television audience who views slot programs. During this time, she had learned how to handle a teleprompter. There, she was able to read what she had composed before and accordingly knew what she would say. But in the *Thoughts for Sunday*, a teleprompter is deliberately not used. The speakers rethink and develop their text anew in each setting by using key words as clues. This method increases the liveliness of the presentation and intensifies the relationship with the audience.

Beate’s experience with the teleprompter had the effect that her announcements appeared to be read; her sentences were designed for reading and were therefore too long and complex for immediate comprehension. Her announcements were meant to appeal to an elite audience ready to follow a discussion between philosophers, social scientists or church staff on a Sunday morning. The type of audience who – shortly before eight p.m. on a Saturday evening is ready to listen to Christian thoughts and to relate them to their own lives – is totally different.

Perhaps this change is not to be expected from a nun, but Beate is a feminist. This difference comes across clearly in many of her *Thoughts for Sunday* telecasts. One of them caused strong reactions. In it, she refers to a few verses of John 8, 1-11. They concern a so-called adulteress.

While Jesus is preaching, the scribes and Pharisees are bringing a woman to him who has committed adultery. They demand that this woman shall be stoned as bidden by Moses. Their intention is to challenge Jesus in order to gain a pretense to act against him. Jesus writes

on the ground: “He who is without sin among you let him cast the first stone at her.” (Romans 2.1).

“He who is without sin among you let him cast the first stone at her.” These words from the bible are quoted over and over again, although the context is often unknown. Beate cites this situation, where the woman is accused as an adulteress and concludes: It takes two people to commit adultery, a woman and a man. So how can men in the bible accuse an adulteress and demand that she be stoned? To apply this to modern day situations: How can adultery committed by a man be accepted but if committed by a woman be regarded as breaking the marriage vows and therefore condemnable?

Beate received plenty of feedback on this particular *Thoughts for Sunday* telecast. Adultery applies to both sexes, regardless of religious beliefs. But the reactions came from women. This might make sense. They are expected to remain faithful in marriage. Are not men expected to also remain faithful? Does not this expectation apply to men as well? Why should they not also comment?

My work with Beate mainly consisted of guiding her towards ways to improve the comprehension of spoken thoughts directed to a particular target audience. To do this, she had to learn to comment in short sentences, to rethink her ideas freshly in each setting instead of just reading them. She had to learn to use common every-day speech and phrases that could reach out to her audience. Finally she had to learn to show up as a nun wearing a habit, without conforming to the expectations caused by this appearance.

For Beate, the reactions to her *Thoughts for Sunday* initially fueled her plans for her activities after her time as television speaker was over. She remained in the town with the consent of her order and formed a discussion group. This group not only discusses religious questions but, even more, it focuses on educational and local affairs. The women talk about current matters and contemplate if they want to take action. Depending on the decision they have reached, they develop plans for where and how they will intervene.

### **The Communal Leader Monika**

Some times ago, Pope Benedict paid his first visit to the USA. He said mass and visited Ground Zero in New York. In addition, he met with some of the many victims of pedophilic priests. I hesitate to

use the word pedophilia in this context, as their Greek roots point to child (*paidi*) and friend (*philos*). The expression “friend,” however, indicates the exact opposite of what is going on here. Anyone who approaches children with sexual intentions is not exactly their “friend.” The pope talked with them for a long time and asked them in the name of the church for forgiveness for the crimes of the priests. The European media reports made much of the reactions of the people in question and of those who appreciated the pope’s actions. Do they really have to be grateful for his actions? The American Catholic Church obviously has paid billions in compensation money to the victims. What happened to the priests? Were they judged by a secular court in the same way as other pedophiles whose actions come to light?

Europe has not been spared from pedophilic crimes committed by priests or monks. So far, the pope has not found words for them. Crimes of this nature are very well known in the European Catholic Church, but they are hushed up whenever possible. If a case really becomes public, the pedophilic priests or monks do not have to worry about penalties dealt out by the church – nor are they turned over to a secular court, as they have not broken a law in the church sense, as opposed to priests who get married. They repent, and those who repent can be forgiven. They might be transferred to a different location, provided that the case becomes public. A case of this kind has come to light again in Switzerland just a short while ago. In one *Thoughts for Sunday*, it serves as an example for the reactions of the church superiors of the Catholic Church.

The speaker Monika is a studied theologian and the communal leader in a Swiss congregation. In this function, she is responsible for many tasks that generally are carried out by the priesthood. She can, for instance, baptize children, perform pastoral work, and pass out communion to residents in senior citizens homes. What she cannot do, however, is to perform communion during mass. During these moments, she sits a bit apart, while the priest performs these rites. During the recordings for the program, *Women – no, thanks?!*, the priest comments on this situation: he finds it “shameful” (sf.tv 2005).

Monika calls the Catholic Church her religious home. She is a staunch Catholic. This is exactly what leads her to permit herself the freedom of thought (Slembek, 1996, p. 134) in her life and also in the *Thoughts for Sunday* telecast. She keeps broaching again and again the fossilization in the Catholic Church. She wants to change things, and she searches for change.

In these *Thoughts for Sunday*, she starts with stating the fact that a married priest holds the mass. According to the rules of the Catholic Church, this possibility can occur only in specific cases. There are married priests after all, for instance, when a married protestant converts to the Catholic faith and becomes a priest. Besides these are fairly rare cases, there are a number of priests in South America who were married with the blessings of Rome.

In her *Thoughts for Sunday*, Monika compares two cases: a priest, who lives in a mature relationship with a woman or a man and does not keep this a secret, is excommunicated. At the same time, a priest or a monk who gives way to his pedophilic desires is only transferred to a different locality provided this becomes known to his superiors and to the public.

As mentioned, the actual provocation was the case of a monk who is obviously a pedophile, who has abused a boy and was transferred to a different locality. The media took up this case which otherwise would not have surfaced and has been hushed up once again by the Catholic Church.

Monika's aim was not to denounce the offender. What she does want and always has wanted is for the Catholic Church to be credible, and she will fight for this goal. She wants clarity, transparency, and for the church to stand by the facts. Jesus and how he treated people sets the standard for her; she mentions the ability to relate to others, mercifulness, and clarity. For her, it is incomprehensible that the church maintains a one-sided interpretation of tradition and power and abandons good people who are living in mature relationships (cf. Wort zum Sonntag, 2.2.08). The church is in dire need of ministers who keep both feet on the ground (ibid). Would it not, then, make sense to let them get married? According to the psychological therapist Udo Rauchfleisch, who is familiar with the problems of priests and monks, the celibacy requirement is partly responsible for sexual assaults that occur within the Catholic Church. Churches that permit marriage are rarely confronted with pedophilic sexuality. In his opinion, priest and monks are satisfying their sexual needs on the weakest - the children (Der Club, Swiss TV, sf.tv 2/2/2008).

Monika receives hundreds of approving emails and letters. She obviously reaches a multitude of people with her doubts in the institutional church and her petrified structure. This is one side of the reactions.

On the part of the Catholic Church, the reactions are different. She is ordered before the bishop, who explains to her in a long conversation (which she experiences as a good conversation) the actions and reactions of the church – matters that she was already aware of before, according to her own words (cp. ,The Club', sf.tv. 2008). In an article of the *Sunday News*, a church superior is quoted as saying that she supposedly caused a storm of protest; she is accused of having held a Boulevard Sermon and to have used it to distract from the real problems; "It showed disrespect for the victims and prevented fighting the true causes" (Ramspeck, 2008, p. 1). In a follow-up talk show featuring as guests two monks, a psychologist specializing in religion, another psychologist, and a married and consequently excommunicated priest, she receives a two-page document from a church superior; the paper describes what she can and cannot say. She does not abide by it.

Did Monika achieve anything with her *Thoughts for Sunday*? This question cannot be confirmed off-hand. The numerous reactions do show that many people are dissatisfied with their church and that they find her credible. The people expect of their church what their church demands of them: namely, that they can believe in her because she is worthy of their common faith – this should give the church superiors some food for thought. The reactions of the church superiors reveal their views of these matters – do they need to change anything? In this talk show only church representatives who did not belong to the church elite were present. They can hardly change anything. Monika's central concern, her demand for a transparent, credible church, was barely discussed. This situation became not only clear in the newspaper articles; it was also the main topic of the TV talk show *Celibate and Pedophilia. The Catholic Church under Crossfire*. In it, a debate about pedophilic sexuality and especially about celibacy was ignited – while her demand for a transparent, credible church was not discussed. How could it even be discussed! The church members who were present did not occupy leading positions; they could speak only for themselves, but not in the name of their church superiors – and the church superiors were not present. Their absence could be interpreted as an opportunity to evade the discussion. Monika's speech had caused a flurry of actions and possibly permanently changed the awareness of the people who responded to her. Is this also the result of the Pope's visit in the U.S.A.? Is it really a sign of changed awareness, when nothing changes in the aftermath, when everything remains the same? A change in awareness must not

only bring about the demand for freedom of thought but also the willingness to work on changes.

Translation from German by Gisela Blevins

## References

- GEISSNER, H. 2000/2007. *Kommunikationspaedagogik*. St. Ingbert.
- GEISSNER H. 1998. Das Ziel liegt bei den Hoerenden – Ueberzeugen oder Ueberreden in rhetorischer Kommunikation? In: *Wiener Jahrbuch fuer Theologie* Bd. 2 Wien 199-213.
- GYSEL, I./MEIER, H. 2003. Sendungskonzept fuer das Wort zum Sonntag. sftv, Schweizer Fernsehen. Zuerich.
- RAMSPECK, S. 2008. Bischoefe machen Fernseh-Theologin die Hoelle heiss. In: *Sonntagszeitung*. [www.sonntagszeitung.ch](http://www.sonntagszeitung.ch), 10.2.2008.
- SLEMBEK, E. 2007. "Wort zum Sonntag": Von der Idee zur Rede. In: (Peier, M. ed.), *Beim Wort genommen. Kommunikation in Gottesdienst und Medien*. Zuerich.
- SLEMBEK, E. 1996. Gedankenfreiheit? In: (H. Barthel, ed.), *Logon didónai. Gespraech und Verantwortung*. Muenchen, Basel, 134-142.
- STERNSTUNDE RELIGION 2005. Die letzte Bastion. Die katholische Kirche und die Frauen. Schweizer Fernsehen, sftv, Zuerich.
- STERNSTUNDE RELIGION 2005. Frauen – nein danke! Die katholisch-feministische Theologin Regula Strobl im Gespraech. Schweizer Fernsehen sftv, Schweizer Fernsehen, Zuerich.
- WORT ZUM SONNTAG, Schweizer Fernsehen sftv, Zuerich. Gesendet am 2.2.2008.
- ZÖLIBAT UND PÄDOPHILIE. Die katholische Kirche im Kreuzfeuer. Schweizer Fernsehen sftv, Zuerich. Sendung am 26.2.2008.

---

<sup>1</sup> Television is governed by public law with federally subsidized broadcasting service stations. Their mission is to provide information; they must observe the proportional representation election system, and their opportunities for advertising are extremely limited.