

# WORLD DAY OF SOCIAL COMMUNICATION

## In the light of the Jubilee 2025

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The origins of the World Day of Social Communication (WDSC) derive from the Conciliar Decree *Inter Mirifica* and the later Pastoral Instruction *Communio et Progressio*. Today we associate the WDSC mainly with the annual Message of the Holy Father, but the original concept was much wider.

The original concept of the WDSC stressed the vital importance of social communication for the Church's apostolic activity. It was to be an occasion for the Church, in a pluralistic world, to bring its own original contribution to the global search for an ethics of communication. It was hoped to foster these aims in a special way at national and even diocesan level. It spoke about the formation of lay Christians who work in the world of social communication. It spoke of generating opportune finances for the Church's activity in the area of communication. It was a very vast programme.

The foundational documents concerning the WDSC were published over 50 years ago. Those who came up with the idea of the WDSC could never have imagined the change in world media culture that would take place over the years that followed. This change and its rapidity means that the WDSC needs to be reviewed consistently in the light of the changed media culture. The review should include an examination of the workings of the WDSC and the impact of the Pope's Message, but also identify how to address today's new actors in the area of social communications.

The WDSC was launched at a time when, for example, broadcasting was dominated by large national state media. In the print media, there were traditionally dominant major newspapers and news magazines in each country.

Today the media scenario has radically changed. In the past, a small diocese might have had, at most, a local Catholic newspaper with limited circulation. The proliferation of local radio opened out new potential for even small dioceses. Social media has radically re-dimensioned the ability of even parishes and individuals.

The widespread privatisation of media ownership in many countries has brought further change. The concept of public service broadcasting has been diminished through the dominance of commercial interests. One result is that media culture in many parts of the world has become less friendly to religion. Coverage too often zooms-in on problems and scandals and indeed often on the more banal aspects of religious culture.

The ability of specifically Church media to combat this challenge has often been weakened by polarisation within many local churches. Polarisation within Catholic media has harmed their ability to evangelise. The limited formation of committed laypersons working in the media has reduced their ability to allow their strong faith commitment to becoming an added dimension to their day-to-day work.

Media culture has changed radically but the potential for the WDSC remains. Interest in the Pope's annual message has if anything increased in recent years. The wider celebration of the WDSC has however in many places been limited to comment on the Pope's message. The gap between the date of the publication of the message and the actual celebration the WDSC has weakened the overall impact of the message.

The Covid pandemic of the past two or three years has led to the cancellation of many public events traditionally associated with the World Day. Some of these will not be revived. The Covid pandemic has also opened up totally new media possibilities of animating Church life.

The proliferation of World Days in the life of the Church and in society has had a negative impact on the manner in which the local Churches can celebrate the WDSC. Taken together the number of

specific “World Days” proposed by the Holy See, by the national Church and the local Church has led to the situation in which more than one half of the Sundays of the year are dedicated for some special event. This has led to the liturgical season being interrupted and to a reduction in the ability of a local Church to be able to celebrate so many of these World Days adequately.

“World Day fatigue” is growing. The very concept of a local Church being able to celebrate properly so many World Days every single year may have to be re-examined. Local Churches tend to build their pastoral and financial plans no longer on an annual but rather on a pluri-annual basis.

All this indicates that this is an important moment for us to reflect in some depth on the manner in which the Church should celebrate the WDSC in the changed culture of media.

- In the first place, the Pope’s Message continues to contribute in an important manner on the overall ethical reflection of media and if anything has done so more effectively in recent years. At the moment, the Message is proposed only as a text. Efforts should be made to develop a multimedia presentation to accompany the text, as was done very effectively this year by the Dicastery for Integral Human Development for the World Day of Refugees. This would help local Church media to present the content of the message.
- While the WDSC should still be held annually, it should occasionally be re-vamped and be celebrated in a stronger manner. This would involve a more detailed proposal to the local Churches and the organization of specialised conferences and events.
- The Jubilee Year of 2025 offers the possibility of such an enhanced celebration. A *Day on Social Communication* should be inserted into the overall Calendar of the Jubilee Celebrations to take place in Rome and across the Church worldwide. The Dicastery for Communications should already set up a working group to explore what this might involve.

- Regarding the relationship between the Pope's Message and the celebration of the WDSC, one could look should look at the practice of the *World Day of Peace*. The theme is announced many months in advance, with a short indication of the motivation for the choice. This could be done through a good audio-visual presentation indicating elements for the celebration and would permit a good preparation for the WDSC. The Pope's Message could then be published much closer to the date of the celebration and it would animate the celebration in a more efficient manner.
- The experience of the celebration of the Jubilee of 2025 could act as a model for future WDSC's. The choice of the date of future celebrations should be the fruit of a consultation as to how best to insert it into the different pastoral calendars of the local Churches.