Intercultural Aspects of Social Communication

Interview With Father Luca Pandolfi

By José Antonio Varela Vidal

ROME, FEB. 22, 2011 (Zenit.org).- The Pontifical Urban University of Rome is attempting to train professionals to use modern means of social communication in an increasingly intercultural world.

ZENIT interviewed Father Luca Pandolfi, director of the university's "Master's in Social Communication in an Inter-Cultural and Missionary Context," about how this degree prepares students to meet the challenges of a changing world.

ZENIT: Why is it necessary to have a master's degree in intercultural communication from the Pontifical Urban University?

Father Pandolfi: Since its origin in 1627, the Urban University was born to form persons and ministers of the Church, missionaries from or sent to border territories, places inhabited and crossed by many cultures, traditions and religions.

In our days, the encounter between cultures, and between culture and the Gospel, is no longer just the experience of some missionary men or women but it takes place, increasingly, in the world of means of social communication.

ZENIT: What is the profile of the communicators that you wish to delineate among the participants?

Father Pandolfi: The project provides for a theoretical and practical formation to create leaders and managers of small and medium local media (newspapers, radio and TV channels) trained at the same time in Web communication, which today, in fact, unites several means of communication.

In addition we want the participants to come out with a strong sensibility and capacity to read and produce media, an intercultural vocation, which is a true challenge of the contemporary age.

ZENIT: Why is there more talk today of "inter-culturing" than of "multi-culturing?"

Father Pandolfi: I believe that in many countries the different models of "inter-culturing" failed because they put together several cultures, one next to the other, trying to find more or less probable ways of reciprocal tolerance and recognition.

In reality, cultures, and it would be better to say persons, communicate, intertwine, are contaminated or struggle among themselves, especially when there is inequality and injustice. Inter-culturing is a path that seeks ways, still difficult, of encounter, dialogue, exchange, shared solutions to different and/or common questions.

ZENIT: Is "inter-culturing" a way out for countries in conflict, where religion isn't tolerated?

Father Pandolfi: More than a way out it is a long path; it is a way where, step by step and with competence and wisdom, we must pass from the simple recognition of the other to the discovery of the richness of the culture or religion of the other.

Culture and religion often coincide; at times they intertwine profoundly.

However, in the majority of cases, the problem is not religion or the difference between religions. Conflicts are struggles for power, and intolerance stems from inequality and injustice, or from those who wish to maintain them.

ZENIT: In his recent message for the World Day of Social Communications, the Pope spoke to us about the social networks on the Internet. How must an inculturated message be presented in these venues?

Father Pandolfi: First I believe that it is necessary to think of the digital network not only as a tool or a means of communication that we can "use" for our objectives, but as a cultural and social venue, with its own culture and its forms of socialization that are also modified in time. It is a venue where images, symbols, ways of writing cross one another and where persons of different ages, social classes, traditions and nationalities interact.

This structural inter-culturing of the network is joined to its apparent technological and at times linguistic homogeneity (basic English).

Now, just as each missionary who wants to take the Gospel to a language and culture different from his own, he lives and shares in this language and this culture, so we must inhabit this digital venue and these social networks without neglecting other forms of communication that also find their diffusion and valuation in the digital network.

ZENIT: How do you evaluate these two first versions of the master's program?

Father Pandolfi: The first was for us -- I am speaking of a multi-cultural docent body of different competencies -- a challenge and a verification of the institutions that generated this master's. The second saw the master's equip itself with a new and modern multimedia classroom, and new didactic ways and practices have opened.

This master's program is renewed step by step, looking at the challenges of the technological or socio-communicative novelties, seeking ways to improve given the demands and needs of the students themselves.

The two versions certainly were, themselves, shared experiences of communication and inter-culturing. We always had students of four continents who, bringing their cultures and sensibilities, helped us to widen our horizons.

ZENIT: What are the requirements to participate? Can one get some financial support? How?

Father Pandolfi: It is enough to have a university degree of the first level (bachelor's degree, or first degree of the licentiate), to be "literate" at the level of information technology and to know the Italian language. The classes are in Italian, so it is very important to be able to understand and at least to express oneself in a basic way in this language.

The master's program takes two semesters, from September to June; one must be present and attend workshops and periods of practice: so one must be available for an academic year.

It is possible to apply for scholarships but there are few and it is difficult to support the complete stay for a year of study; it is easier for us to collaborate with expenses of registration and enrollment.

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