

REMEMBERING FRANZ-JOSEF EILERS SVD (1932–2021)

Divine Word Missionary and communication expert Franz-Josef Eilers passed away in Manila on January 13, 2021. He was a prominent SVD communication and media expert and had dedicated his life to social communication and the formation of missionaries in the SVD and beyond for an evangelisation in terms of communication. He was a member of the SVD Missiological Institute since 1984 and a diligent and trusted contributor to *Verbum SVD*.

When Franz-Josef Eilers found out that a *Festschrift* for him was in the making to celebrate his 75th birthday, he is reported to have commented “literally (in German): ‘Wenn denn schon so etwas gemacht wird, dann aber bitte ein Beitrag zur Sache – keine Lobhudelei’ [If you really want to make it, then be it in support of the matter, and not a *Lobhudelei*.] Well, how do we translate *Lobhudelei*? This word is typically German ...” (Rolfes/Zukowski 2007, 5) and difficult to translate, extravagant praise between eulogy and flattering. Remembering him should therefore take up some of the “matter” itself that he dedicated his life to and he stood for during his lifelong engagement.

Opening Horizons

Eilers was born in Emsdetten, near Münster (Germany). After the War, he entered secondary school with the SVD at Bad Driburg. Already there, he started a students’ magazine, the *Kleiner Driburger Anzeiger* (KDA, “Little Driburg Advertiser”), which turned into *Unser Weg* (“Our way”) once technological advances permitted the use of hectography for larger editions. He entered the SVD novitiate at St Augustin in 1953, took his first vows in 1955 and went on with the philosophical and theological studies in preparation for priesthood and his missionary engagement. There he had the creativity and a large crowd of dedicated fellow students to set up a “mission apostolate press service,” at times a team of twenty students who edited letters and reports of missionaries, reproduced photographs, organised press releases and offered the material to diocesan papers and the local periodicals which were eager to get first-hand information from a world in fast expansion—an important articulation of missiological, anthropological and journalistic interests and a perfect training ground for young missionaries. Journalism, media, cultures and mission was to become one of the pillars to build his life on.

In 1959, Eilers took final vows and was ordained. He had not put forward any wish for a “mission”—*petitio missionum*—and let the superiors send him where they wanted. Due to his fame and good connections with the Superior

General, the appointment to study journalism¹ did not come as a real surprise. He was supposed to get prepared for work with the magazine *Stadt Gottes*. In between, he had to take a year of practical pastoral engagement at Steyl which allowed him to be in touch with youth and spiritual guidance. The care for students and spirituality were to become the other pillar to build his life on. Nevertheless, he used his time in Steyl to prepare a rich pictorial biography of Arnold Janssen (1962; re-edited in 1987a; 1987b).

In 1961, he took up studies of journalism, art history and missiology at Münster University. To conclude a first cycle on missiology under Josef Glazik, Eilers published a study, with the orientation of his journalism mentor Henk Prakke, on the topic of Christian journalism in Africa (1964). It offers an overview over the church engagement in media and communication there. Eilers complains that there is virtually no material available and consequently acknowledges the help he received from several missionaries from Ghana and Congo as well as from Rome (1964, 103). Henk Prakke prefaced the book and highlighted the pioneering fact that this study brings together the two “underdeveloped” fields of *Africa*, just appearing among the United Nations, and the *church* as an agent of communication and media (1964, 7f.). This book probably gives already the keys for his life-long engagement: detailed information on press, media and communication structures, and the intention to serve the church in its outreach and diffusion efforts.

For his PhD research, Eilers spent eight months in New Guinea to study primal communication media, and another three months in the Philippines, Japan, Taiwan, Hongkong, Macau and India for data collection (a report: 1965a; 1967a the PhD thesis), “an exploration of uncharted territory in media studies” (Klein, in Schmolke 2007, 293). The idea of extensive research trips for doctoral studies was something rather new at the time and left his fellow PhD students in envy and wonder (Schmolke 2021, 123). In his study, Eilers looks at communication and media in a broad sense including speech, signs, drums and music, plus a list of what could be transmitted through drums in different New Guinea areas (1967, 257-260).

With his studies completed, he moved to the Generalate in Rome to take care of its publications and as a consultant for communication and media topics. He engaged in the relevant Catholic communication associations like UCIP (press), UNDA (radio and television) and OCIC (film)—today under the umbrella of “Signis”—and collaborated in the establishment of the *Centre for the Study of Communication and Culture* (CSCC, “Bob White’s place,” as it was known) in London (today at Santa Clara University, USA). In Rome, Eilers started lecturing at the Gregorian University, and in 1969, at the Superior General’s request, he also took care of communications with the Com-

¹ The concept is “Publizistik,” a fine German term including journalism as well as what now would be media studies.

mittee on *Society, Development and Peace* (SODEPAX) at the World Council of Churches in Geneva. In that year he also advocated strongly in favour of establishing the *Catholic Media Council* (CAMECO) in Aachen (Germany), a consulting agency for media projects and their funding organisations.² From 1971 to 1985, Eilers served as CAMECO's Executive Director.

Communicatio Socialis

The fresh winds even in Rome in the first post-Vatican II years strongly animated and enthused Eilers' engagement for communication. The church, at last, took a positive approach to media and communication. The Council had presented a document on the topic, *Inter mirifica*—the *Decree on the Means of Social Communication* (December 4, 1963). Due to the early birth in the Vatican II development of a positive approach to world and society, the document rather soon was considered lacking, even the Council itself was not too sure about it and therefore ordered the elaboration of a pastoral instruction “to ensure that all the principles and rules of the Council on the means of social communication be put into effect” (IM 23).³ For the rest of his life, Eilers returned time and again to this moment of the Council inspiration regarding “social communication,” a new concept introduced into the public and scientific discourse by the church and by no means a minor development (e.g. Eilers 2016).

As he knew from his own study and research, anyone trying to find orientation in the field of church communication under journalistic/media studies or pastoral perspectives would be forced to start from scratch: “There are no summary works, there are no pastoral communicational or even mission communicational institutes, and one searches in vain for specialist journals that go beyond current information services on radio and film, for example, and that try to present the entire field of journalism in detail. Not to mention comprehensive reporting that, if possible, also goes beyond the European or North American continent!” Therefore, he took the initiative to launch a specific journal to cover these fields and fill the void. “This is where the new journal COMMUNICATIO SOCIALIS, which has deliberately chosen its name from the title of the Council Decree, is intended to make a contribution” (Eilers 1968, 2; this is the first editorial and presentation of the new journal).⁴ Even if in church history, the relation to communication and media had been rather reserved, with Vatican II Eilers welcomed a new era: “It remained for the Second Vatican Council to solemnly emphasise for the

² On CAMECO and Eilers' contribution and involvement see the appreciation by D. Frank, then the CAMECO Executive Director (Frank 2007, 106-108).

³ This was to be the Pastoral Instruction on the means of social communication *Communio et progressio* (January 29, 1971).

⁴ All translation of German texts are mine.

whole church the importance of journalistic means and also the positive task of the church in this field. One can say whatever one likes about the decree *Inter mirifica* of 4 December 1963: at least since the publication of this document, journalism as an obligatory task of Christians is no longer a question. For the church, the means of communication are fundamentally not something existing alongside many other things in this world and in this modern society. At the latest since *Inter mirifica*, the media have been declared as God-given and thus obligatory means of the profession and the proclamation of faith,” he goes on in the presentation of the journal.

When co-founding editor Michael Schmolke retired from the journal’s editorial board after 45 years he referred to the early days: “I was present at the founding preparations in 1967 and at the first issue (January-March 1968)—and have remained so ever since, after the inventor of the idea, Fr Dr Franz Josef Eilers SVD, invited Karl Höller⁵ (then a journalist at *Kirche und Leben*, the Münster diocesan gazette) and myself (then scientific assistant at the Institute for Journalism at the University of Münster) to the founding and further cooperation. [...] Since its inception, the editorial team comprised three or four people. In its first guise (Eilers/Höller/Schmolke, 1968–1988 [...]) there functioned a kind of hierarchy, although never formalised, which was given by the functional authority of the father of the idea, FJE. Just as informally, due to necessities (Eilers in Rome, Eilers in Geneva, etc.), the role of a managing editor developed later. Karl Höller took care of it. [...] Mission and intercultural communication were the ideal connection” for the journal (Schmolke 2012, 342). “In 1968 (!) Fr Franz-Josef Eilers SVD invented our journal—quite literally. He developed the concept and suggested the (then highly topical) title *Communicatio Socialis* [...]. Since then, Franz-Josef Eilers has led the journal with prudence and great commitment. When he was called to the Philippines by his congregation, he remained not only a diligent contributor but also a counsellor in difficult cases, in short, the patron of the journal” (Schmolke et al., 2003, 4f.). After three shifts in the journal’s subtitle —“Journal for journalism in church and world” until 1993, “International journal for communication in religion, church and society” until 2013 and now “Journal for media ethics and communication in church and society” (Altmeppen et al., 2013, 283)—the journal is thriving, with a different editorial team and publisher (at Nomos; see Altmeppen et al., 2017).

⁵ Karl Höller (1937–2020) had entered noviciate with Eilers and they shared their concerns and interests, collaborated in the publishing team during their studies in St Augustin. After philosophy, Höller left the SVD and became a journalist and worked at missio (Aachen), among other engagements. Later on, he ran a publishing house (Bergmoser+Höller). He remained a close friend of Eilers’.

The Communicatio Socialis Yearbook

Building on *Communicatio Socialis* and its contribution, Eilers suggested the edition of a *yearbook* in the same line as the German journal. The communications coordinator at the SVD Generalate in Rome, Tomy Luiz SVD, and the business editor of Satprakashan Sanchar Kendra (Indore, India), Clarence Srambical SVD, together with Eilers edited the *Yearbook* in order to offer a space for the reflection of media and communication particularly to readers from the “Third World”: “The design and arrangement of the Yearbook are basically identical with the German publication, the content however is different and serves exclusively the needs and interests of the Christian Communicator in Asia, Oceania, Africa and Latin America. Its objective is to provide and sustain a scientific basis for all questions directly or indirectly connected with Christian communication in these continents. Each Yearbook will contain about 300 pages of scholarly articles, written in English, mostly by communicators of international renown. While information and research on Christian communications would constitute the primary concern of the Yearbook, there will be a continued effort to focus the issues consistently in a Third World perspective” (Luiz 1981a, 321f.; Luiz 1981b). The *Yearbook* carried the subtitle “Journal of Christian Communication in the Third World.”

The *Yearbook* did not translate *Communicatio Socialis* articles but carried fresh material mostly from Africa, Asia and Latin America. Consequently, in the *Yearbook* topics related to the demands and proposals of a new world order of information and communication are quite prominent—a vast field of discussion and demands of the “Third World” with regard to the imbalances in news distribution and information flow. The UNESCO promoted democratisation in this field on the basis of the “MacBride Report.”⁶ As a consequence of such developments, the USA and the UK withdrew from UNESCO in protest for several years.

The *Communicatio Socialis Yearbook* published nine volumes (until IX, 1990) and then ceased to exist, probably due to the fact that its main editor Tomy Luiz SVD moved away from Rome in mid-1991 and eventually left the Society.

Communication as Part of the SVD Formation

CAMECO served Eilers as a perfect platform for his commitment to communication and networking in the field. He established world-wide contacts and gained a tremendous overview of projects and processes related to media topics and communication studies. Of course, it was not all talk and travel

⁶ The MacBride Report: International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems, *Many Voices One World. Towards a New More Just and More Efficient World Information and Communication Order*, London/New York/Paris: Kogan Page/Unipub/Unesco 1980. See White 1983.

but also the backbreaking compiling of lists, as the different directories show he collaborated in editing there (1975a; 1980a;⁷ 1982a; 1987c).

SVD Superior General Henry Heekeren encouraged him to work on the organisation of communication formation for the congregation, as this concern had become important for the SVD. In September 1985, a group of communication practitioners and researchers met at Nemi, near Rome, to set up a formation programme. It included detailed suggestions on the topics and themes to be treated in noviciate (e.g., Arnold Janssen and his press apostolate), philosophy and theology with communication and culture as transversal perspectives and the corresponding practical skills (e.g., preaching, slide-shows, radio programmes, group media, structure of news reports, including elementary things such as the treatment of microphones—the ignorance in handling such basic things is still appalling at times and shows how important it would have been to implement these programmes). Sadly, the “Nemi programme” rarely was implemented in SVD circles and rather soon went into oblivion; Eilers keeps up the memory of this document in his *Communicating in Community* (1994, 280-282; until 2002b).

Eilers moved to St Augustin and established an “Intercultural Communication Research Unit SVD” for the promotion of interdisciplinary study and research on the communication of cultures (see 1986a). He pursued the certainly utopian perspective of integrating communication into the curriculum at the theological faculty at St Augustin and restructure the entire faculty accordingly: Communication, media and different cultural skills were supposed to be no longer the specific interest subjects of selected students but were to transversally restructure all disciplines. However, Eilers had to learn that the old dog was not intended to learn new tricks, the theological faculty could not integrate all his proposals to that end. As Eilers would not go for anything less than full-fledged implementation, he rather withdrew from the field and moved to the Philippines, probably with quite some frustration. He meant to dedicate the “rest of his life” to the spiritual guidance of the stu-

⁷ From an enthusiastic report on the project: “In Aachen [...], an eye-catching work makes its way out of an inconspicuous office. The 544 pages are designed to brighten up the Dark Continent. The title of the book in English promises: *Christian Communication Directory Africa*. [...] Editor Fr Franz-Josef Eilers SVD explains, the handbook is not only intended to cover the press, radio and television, not only book publishers, film productions, archives and other modern journalism. Also, the centuries-old traditional means of interpersonal contact, which remain just as important in Africa as today’s means of communication. The churches have increasingly recognised the need to pay attention to them. The book is unique not only because it is the first attempt at [ecumenical] cooperation. It is also intended to be the first step in an ever-renewing series that will be extended to Asia, Latin America and other areas. The handbook can count on worldwide attention in professional circles” (*Aachener Volkszeitung*, Sept. 4, 1980).

dents there. This context of spiritual guidance led to a series of publications and collections where he intended to provide orientation to “all my spiritual directees past, present and future, as well as to all bishops, priests and seminarians trying to live a deeper spiritual life in their daily ministry” (1999a, 5: the “edited” refers to the fact that he collected quotes from church fathers and popes, but entirely in his line of reflection and support; 2002a). It shows him grounded in a more traditional priestly spirituality, profoundly a “man of the church” and at its service. Of course, it would not have been Franz-Josef Eilers had he stayed off teaching communication and getting others into the field as well. Soon he set up a small training studio at Tagaytay Seminary and got himself involved in many teaching assignments and coordinating offices, not least at the Asian bishops’ secretariate (FABC, Office for Social Communication [OSC]).

Teaching and Bridgebuilding

Personally, I owe Franz-Josef Eilers a lot. In the late 1970s, still as a student at St Gabriel’s (Austria), we had occasional block seminars on media and communication. At that time our world still was small enough that meeting someone like Eilers always was quite an event to widen our horizons, as he told of meetings in Nairobi or Manila or showed us newspapers from Papua New Guinea or Brazil or mentioned radio stations and their programme structure in passing—glimpses at a wider world. We learnt to write news reports in order to get acquainted with the structure of such items. Eilers brought us in contact with prestigious journalists from Vienna who introduced us to their views and work and made these courses entertaining and interesting.

In early 1983, when I was already in Ecuador and dedicated to my language study, I received a letter from Eilers, quite in the fashion of Acts 9:11: “Go to the Quito UNDA/OCIC office and present yourself there, they will tell you the rest ...” As “Eilers’ friend” I was invited to a Latin American meeting after the dissolution of SERPAL,⁸ a prestigious radio production organisation, and there I met many very creative Latin American communicators from radio and group media, many of them close friends to this day.

When I opted for further studies for my engagement with communication and media in Ecuador, again it was Eilers who brought me in contact with

⁸ SERPAL (“Servicio Radiofónico para América Latina”) was started in the 1960s in order to produce high quality radio programmes for Latin America. “El Padre Vicente,” a drama series of a priest in slums and dealing with the poor and their perspectives on life, became one of the first classics. The last was a series on Jesus (“Un tal Jesús,” 1980) consisting of 144 programmes of 14 minutes each showing a very Latin American redeemer and human Jesus within a context of social transformation. Conservative ecclesiastical sectors condemned the series and, as a consequence, SERPAL was dissolved.

the *Centre for Mass Communication Research* (CMCR) at Leicester University (UK). There, his “good friend” Prof James Halloran had set up an MA and PhD programme. He had been a consultant to the MacBride Commission and thus favoured Third World perspectives on information flow and critical research. As a consequence, the courses attracted students mostly from Asia and Africa, at times also from Latin America (in the late 1980s, due to the UK position against UNESCO, the CMCR went through some difficulties). Many SVDs studied there, and in the late 1980s the running gag was that the CMCR could not run an MA course if there was not at least one SVD on the programme. Later on, Eilers geared SVDs rather to the faculty at Los Baños, Philippines, where a similar communication course had been established. We teamed up again when I came to the Missiological Institute and we communicated on articles and loads of book reviews he wrote for *Verbum SVD*.

For a long time Eilers’ writing was oriented not by a theoretical agenda but more by practical requirements, such as the presentation of Arnold Janssen (1962; 1987a; 1987b). He published reports of meetings and conferences in *Communicatio Socialis* and *Verbum SVD*. Many of his publications originated from his views on cultures. He taught intercultural communication at the Gregorian University since 1981 and published at first a small resource book *Communicating between Cultures* (1987d), which soon saw an Italian version and a re-print in India (1993). There, he sets out from approaches to culture and connects the communicational aspects: non-verbal communication, oral cultures, interaction in different societies, values and meaning, and the shifts when content is communicated between different cultures. Subsequent editions expanded the book’s basic structure and content from 130 to 220 pages in ⁴2012 according to the requirements of his students. The new editions tried to include further material and particularly bibliography in fields that developed rapidly over the years.

A similar course book is his *Communicating in Community* (1994)⁹ designed to introduce (future) priests and religious to social communication. The different chapters cover human communication, different systems and elements and proceed in widening circles to mass communication (journalism, press, broadcasting in radio and television), film and group media. There is also an extensive chapter on church and communication. In the 4th updated edition (⁴2009), he added a short section on cyberspace and globalisation in communication.

His interest in establishing a theological comprehension of communication and media had produced some early writings at the occasion of church

⁹ There is a Spanish translation of the second edition (1994), prepared by the SVD Zonal Communication Coordination in the late 1990s in Quito (Ecuador), maybe available not in print but in a digital form.

documents: *Inter mirifica* of the Vatican Council led to the establishment of the journal *Communicatio Socialis* and to studies on *Communio et progressio* (1972). His own proposal of pastoral communication and theology of communication started with his *Communicating in Ministry and Mission* (2003a; ²2004; ³2008; ⁴2018). In 2000, he had set up an MA course for pastoral communication at Manila's Santo Tomas University, and this was his textbook for the programme. There, Eilers lays out his perspectives on evangelisation, pastoral care and planning and ecclesiastical structures for communication. He designs a theology of communication and looks at evangelisation in terms of communication. He could make good use of positions at the FABC Office for Communication in his responsibility since 1995 to serve these purposes. It is also in this context that he set up the "Asian Research Center for Religion and Social Communication" (ARC) in Bangkok in 1999, with the corresponding yearbook and journal (*Religion and Social Communication*, with two issues per year from 1.2003; see Eilers 2012a; 2012b).

Franz-Josef Eilers did not really manage to retire. On his last holiday in Germany a few years ago, he dedicated his time at St Augustin to a deeper study of Gadamer's *Truth and Method (Wahrheit und Methode, 1960)*, as one of his students had worked on it and Eilers wanted to return to the "real thing" in German and make sure of the perspectives. Two weeks before his death, he still wrote to a friend in the Netherlands that he "had given up my teaching at the university, but I still have to review a couple of theses" (in Schmolke 2021, 122) and most likely left several of his students as orphans.

He was honoured for his services in many places, among them with the prestigious Filipino Titus-Brandsma-Award (TBAP) in 2015.

For me, Franz-Josef Eilers remains a confrere with an outstanding dedication to his vocation for communication and intercultural relations. Certainly also a child of his time and in spiritual and theological aspects more cautious than daring, he pursued throughout his entire life being a faithful priest and missionary at the service of the church in its relationship to a world in need and expectation of good news. On Wednesday, January 13, 2021, he took the last step towards the core of the "matter" he had dedicated his life to—the Word in the many words and communication forms of all the different cultures worldwide. May he enjoy the communion with the Divine Word.

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