

THE GOOD OF SPIRITUAL CLOSENESS IN THE COVID-19 ERA

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Abstract

One of the major issues that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to the fore for discussion is how to cope with social distancing. Social distancing became a precautionary measure for coping with this virus since it is easily transmitted through physical contact. However, this has not adequately addressed human beings' need for one another. Despite the growing culture of individualism, meeting each other is unavoidable because no one can survive alone. This paper seeks to address how to meet this need for the other from a spiritual-theological perspective. While it accepts social distancing, it proposes and argues that spiritual closeness is one of the possible means of meeting the need for the other. It is the life of a human relationship and its place and role can only be obstructed by choice and not by any social circumstance. Though physical contact in a relationship is very good and important, the paper argues that it is not all about human contact. Other ways of contact satisfy the human being's need for each other. Among these various means that may be employed to meet the need for the other at a moment of a pandemic, such as COVID 19, spiritual closeness is one and has a greater service even when one falls victim to the pandemic. The work shall use the theological method.

Keywords: Social distancing, spiritual closeness, COVID 19,

Introduction

The spiritual is often downplayed in a world that is recording success in science and technology. Also with the tendency to tilt towards secularism, spiritual solutions to issues are often less considered or not even considered at all. Yet experience has shown that with the recorded failure of the sciences in many situations of difficulty, many have always discovered that sciences do not have all it takes for the world's survival. When the chips are down, human beings realise that the key to the survival of the world lies in the spiritual.¹ COVID-19 pandemic has proven this fact in so many ways. Scientifically advanced nations of the world have not been able to find the right solution to the COVID-19 pandemic. Many have resorted to prayers, both in the Western world and in developing countries. Considering spiritual closeness as one of the solutions to the issue of meeting the human need for a relationship with one another as social beings in a pandemic situation that calls for social distancing, the question is, what is spiritual closeness? How is it lived and how does it help in human relationships, especially when there is no physical contact and sometimes no means of communication? These are some of the questions that this paper seeks to answer.

In this direction, after some clarifications of certain terminologies for a good understanding of this discussion, efforts would be made to discuss spiritual closeness from a biblical perspective, Fathers of the Church, other teachings of the Church, and some theological reflections on the matter especially within the present context of the pandemic.

Clarification of some important terminologies

The term Social-distancing is coined to describe the situation in which human physical close relationship with others in human society is reduced despite the need for companionship. There are so many reasons for this reduction, but within the context of this paper, it is for the prevention of the easy transmission of the Corona Virus. In this direction, Spiritual closeness which is always possible, even without physical closeness is equally coined to describe the situation where the relationship is mainly spiritual. Though there may be the possibility of seeing each other at a distance, the closeness is experienced at the spiritual level. This is

what is encouraged at this time of COVID-19. The term COVID-19 is an acronym designed to tell about the disease. CO stands for “Corona”, VI stands for “Virus”, D stands for “Disease” and 19 stands for 2019. Corona is the name of the virus causing the situation of a disease. This virus was first discovered in the year 2019. So COVID-19 refers to corona virus-caused-disease discovered in the year 2019. This disease is experienced virtually in all parts of the world as a global issue. For this, it is referred to as a pandemic, meaning it is a world outbreak.

Spiritual Closeness from Theological Perspective

Both in the African spirituality and the Old Testament, social distancing and spiritual closeness are first experienced between God and human beings. God is immanent and yet transcendent. In African Spirituality, God is perceived as immanent yet transcendent. In his immanence, Africans believe that He is reachable with ease through spiritual means such as prayerful address. Donatus Pius Ukpog opines that “From his/her deep or ingrained religious psyche, God is a natural experience for an African”.² Corroborating this idea, Chris Nwaka Egbulem maintains that “especially African spirituality sees the glory of God made manifest in humanity. Names given at traditional naming ceremonies ordinarily have spiritual references to God or religious connotations.”³ Yet this God that is so close and even felt everywhere in creation is equally invisible, a mystery, transcendent, and far away. Dominique Zahan said:

Among the significant elements of the knowledge of the nature of God, the distancing of him is undoubtedly the most widespread and the most firmly rooted in the beliefs of Africa. Humans, earth dwellers par excellence, see the Divine Being, both in space and in emotional perception, as an entity so distant that it is sometimes impossible to name it and especially to address invocation or to devote cults to it.⁴

He cannot be named. He cannot be reached physically. Yet He is so close, present, and possible to be related with through prayers, the pattern of which is well described by John Mbiti.⁵

An African does not have what may be called social closeness with God because He is invisible and His person is not known. But an African has a spiritual closeness with God who is believed to be present spiritually and spiritually felt virtually everywhere in creation. Beyond this, is Africans relationship with the dead. They are believed to be spiritually present even though they are invisible. When they are spoken to spiritually, they respond by their deeds. The African equally believes that the spirit of everyone is reachable anywhere irrespective of distance. Consequently, when one cannot be seen physically, he can be invoked spiritually as it has often happened and related with either to bless or to destroy him or her.

In the Old Testament, God, even though experienced very close according to the Genesis account of creation, remained invisible. The whole interaction between God and Abraham and the Patriarch was equally not a physical one except instances God came to them taken the form of human beings as in the case of three strangers that Abraham cared for (Gen.18:1-19:33). God is transcendent, invisible, and cannot be known in His person such that even when Moses desired to know Him, it was His back that he saw and told that any human being that sees the face of God would die. Yet God was experienced very close to them that He could be communicated with spiritually.

In the New Testament, spiritual closeness is seen first when Mary, who carried Jesus in her womb visited Elizabeth in her pregnancy period. . At Mary's greeting, the child in Elizabeth's womb leaped for joy (Lk.1:39-44). The two children in their mother's womb communicated. Therefore, divine Incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ made God visible and reachable as a man among us. But Jesus in His earthly ministry showed instances when He was physically absent yet spiritually present to His disciples especially moments of trouble such as on the sea (Mt 14:22-32). This was the reason why He was aware of the trouble they were going through in the sea and He walked towards them. The promise of Jesus to remain close to His disciples after His death to the end of time (Mt 28:20) shows the possibility of spiritual closeness without physical presence after death. He lived true to this promise as manifested when Paul seeking to persecute the Christians was on his way to Damascus (Acts 9:1-19).

However, the teaching of Jesus on spiritual closeness came out very clear in Matthew 18:19 when He taught His disciples the condition for granting requests. Jesus said: “Again, (amen,) I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything for which they are to pray, it shall be granted to them by my heavenly Father.” To agree is a thing of the heart that may not necessarily entail physical presence or closeness to each other. So the true closeness that enables the effectiveness of prayer is the closeness or oneness in the hearts (spiritual) of people not physical. All these are what God considers before granting anything we ask for.

Furthermore, in verse 20, the Lord says: “For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them.” This means though physical closeness is good, the efficacy of prayers in common does not lie in their physical togetherness but being together in the name of Jesus. This too is a matter of the heart and mind. From this teaching of Christ, it means in matters with God, our relationship with each other even though involves physical expression, has to be one of the heart, mind, and spirit (spiritually closeness). Even when the situation does not allow physical expression, once the spirits, minds, and hearts are together, the relationship and the need to be close to each other is fulfilled. This spiritual closeness was the stress and what defined the early Christian community, even at moments of persecutions (Acts.12:12; Acts. 16:25). The apostles’ letters to their various communities equally express it to their communities despite physical absence and social distance. This point comes out very clearly in Paul’s second letter to the Corinthian community on the matter of immorality in which he addressed them in spirit. He said:

It is widely reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of a kind not found even among pagans—a man living with his father’s wife. And you are inflated with pride. Should you not rather have been sorrowful? The one who did this deed should be expelled from your midst. I, for my part, although absent in body but present in spirit, have already, as if present, pronounced judgment on the one who has committed this deed, in the name of (our) Lord Jesus: when you have gathered together and I am with you in spirit with the power of the Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for

the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved on the day of the Lord (1Cor.5:1-5).

Despite the distance, Paul was aware, concerned, and interested in the affairs of the Corinthian communities. He could properly address their situation spiritually. He said he was present with them in spirit and spoke to them as if physically present with them. From these Pauline words, it is very clear that people may be physically distanced from each other, and spiritually they are present to one another by having each other in mind, heart, and spirit, and also interested in each other's affairs. Such enables them to know what is happening to each other and as well able to communicate as if physically present to each other. Paul at a distance without His physical presence in his letter to the Corinthian community said: "We have spoken frankly to you, Corinthians; our heart is open wide. You are not constrained by us; you are constrained by your affections. As recompense in kind (I speak as to my children), be open yourselves." (2Cor. 6:11-13). But such presence is possible when they live in union with God. In God, interests are born out of love for each other and this bridges the gap created by physical distance. The good of such spiritual closeness is that it is more powerful and it affects the good desire the two people have for each other because God that is present in the relationship.

The Fathers of the Church

The age of persecution and martyrdom was one in which social distance and spiritual closeness were well shown. Apart from the fact that Christians were praying for each other from their various places of hiding, the Fathers of these periods were very much close to their flocks spiritually especially through prayers and writings to encourage them in the face of persecutions and threats to their lives. Notable among these Apostolic Fathers was St. Ignatius of Antioch. His writings were addressed to various communities to promote Christian unity battle against heresy, and to encourage them in the face of persecution and martyrdom, and as well to dissuade the Christians in Rome from preventing his martyrdom. All these were expressions of spiritual closeness at a time of social distance.⁶

Significant teaching on matters of spiritual closeness especially in a situation of social distance and even physical absence was made during the monastic period in the Church. Against the belief that hermits and monks seek to escape from the challenges of the world and have lost touch with the world, these teachings and even the attitudes of the hermits and monks toward the world show the contrary. They are very much involved with the world spiritually. Therefore, the basis of any authentic Christian spirituality is charity, love of God, and neighbour. The hermits and monks are people that were driven by a desire to seek places where they would be able to live this charity, love of God, and neighbour to a heroic level. Consequently, they went to the desert not with God alone in their hearts but neighbours and the entire world in their hearts too. It is therefore really a different way that they considered better and stronger for relating with God and neighbours and the world. According to Jordan Aumann, St. Anthony of Egypt, the Father of Eremitical life, teaches how to maintain this life of charity and love for God, neighbour, and the world in the desert even without the physical presence. He writes:

But lest the hermit falls a victim to pride and self-love, he must, as a disciple of Christ, practice love of neighbour; and he can do this by immolating himself for the salvation of souls, by his prayers for others, and by supporting them in the faith through his spiritual counseling. Indeed, according to St. Anthony, the solitary must be willing to leave his desert when the good of the Church or the good of souls requires it.⁷

The hermits who embrace solitary life driven by charity engage in a relationship with others through spiritual closeness. They fulfil the Christian demand to love one's neighbour by their interests in the situation of others, by their prayers and openness to attend to anyone who needs their spiritual attention. St. Anthony of Egypt displayed this charity towards those who visited him in the desert for spiritual guidance⁸ and was willing to come out of the desert to offer counsels and instructions to those who wished to follow his spirituality when the need arose. The fact of charity governing the life of monks based on which spiritual closeness is essential for monasticism was well emphasised by St. Basil the

Great in the East, St. Augustine of Hippo, and St. Benedict of Nursia in the West who concentrated more on how to live it within the monastery. This group of monks gave preference to community life for this purpose. St. Augustine for instance though encouraged communal life stressed the basis on which it is built. It is one heart with others which is an interior spiritual matter. In this context, he redefined a monk, not as one alone from others but one who has agreed not only to live with others but to live and share one heart and mind with others for fraternal charity.⁹ From him, one understands that the issue of spiritual closeness is not limited to those who are distanced from each other socially and physically, it is the basis for any true communal fraternal relationship.

Living in the spirit of spiritual closeness has been the definition of the religious life even to the present time both among the strict contemplatives and the active life, the solitary hermits and the monks in the community. One of the saints, who though a strict contemplative Carmelite, lived this spiritual closeness beyond the confine of the monastery is St. Therese of Liseux (1873-1897). She was a saint who through prayers and unceasing sacrifices engaged spiritually on a mission. She engaged in the salvation of the soul to such a heroic level that Pope Pius XI declared her patroness of mission on December 14th, 1927 along with St. Francis Xavier that was actively involved on a mission in India and Japan.¹⁰ In her autobiography, she said:

...since the 'the zeal of the Carmelite embraces the whole world, I hope with the grace of God to be useful to more than two missionaries and I could not forget to pray for all without casting aside simple priests whose mission at times is as difficult to carry out as that of apostles preaching to the infidels. Finally, I want to be a daughter of the Church as our Holy Mother St. Teresa was and to pray for the Holy Father's intentions which I know embrace the whole world. This is the general purpose of my life, but all this would not have prevented me from praying and uniting myself in a special way to the works of my dear little angels if they had become priests. Well, then! this is how I am spiritually united to the apostles whom Jesus has given me as brothers.¹¹

Furthermore, spiritual closeness enables and engages religious in spiritual fraternal relationships with the world¹², and in this direction Fathers of the Second Vatican Council teach about religious life:

Let no one think either that their consecrated way of life alienates the religious from other men or makes them useless for human society. Though in some cases they have no direct relations with their contemporaries, still in a deeper way they have their fellow men present with them in the heart of Christ and cooperate with them spiritually, so that the building up of human society may always have its foundation in the Lord and have him as its goal: otherwise, those who build it may have laboured in vain.”¹³

The religious whether secluded contemplatives or active are spiritually close and connected to others in the world. They have others in the mind of Christ, offering them their spiritual relationship through prayers and any other ways that may be spiritually helpful. It is for this, they are often entrusted with the intentions of people for prayers. Saint Silouan the Athonite (1866-1936) teaches what makes spiritual closeness possible especially for the saints. He said:

The Holy Spirit dwells in our Church; in the sacraments; in the Holy Scriptures; in the souls of the faithful. The Holy Spirit unites all men, and so the Saints are close to us, and when we pray to them they hear our prayers in the Holy Spirit, and our souls feel that they are praying for us. The Saints live in another world, and there through the Holy Spirit, they behold the glory of God and the beauty of the Lord’s countenance. But in the same Holy Spirit they see our lives, too, and our deeds. They know our sorrows and hear our ardent prayers.

In their lives they learned of the love of God from the Holy Spirit; and he who knows love on earth takes it with him into eternal life in the Kingdom of Heaven, where love grows and becomes perfect.¹⁴

Saint Silouan shows clearly that differences of place do not constitute obstacles to the relationship in spiritual closeness. Two things enable this spiritual closeness: The first is the Holy Spirit and the second is love. One succeeds through the Holy Spirit when he/she has love as of God. Wherever such a person goes, as he/she goes with this love, he/she would be able to maintain spiritual closeness with the beloved through the help of the Holy Spirit. This closeness is experienced through feelings. When prayers are exchanged, it is felt.

The Magisterial Teachings

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council taught that the Church is a body in spiritual connection with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit.¹⁵ Therefore, the Church is a body that has its life in the Holy Spirit. This Spirit dwells in the Church and the hearts of its members. In this sense, it is a spiritual body. This Spirit enables it to exist in spiritual connection with God the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit and as well as in the spiritual connection among her members forming one body of Christ. Consequently, the Fathers added that “Giving the body unity through himself, both by his power and by the interior union of the members, this same Spirit produces and stimulates love among the faithful. From this, it follows that if one member suffers anything, all the members suffer with him, and if one member is honoured, all the members together rejoice (cf. 1Cor. 12:26).”¹⁶ Distance does not negate this union as the Fathers teach: “All the faithful scattered throughout the world are in communion with each other in the Holy Spirit so that ‘he who dwells in Rome knows those in most distant parts to be his members’ (*qui Romae sedet, Indos scit membrum suum esse*).”¹⁷ It is this Holy Spirit that defines, inspires, and as well enables loving relationships among members of the Church, and works in their hearts to unite them interiorly. By enabling them to be spiritually connected, the Holy Spirit enables them to be part of each other’s life spiritually, be aware and share in each other’s feelings, concerns, and worries and live in love with each other.

When the Fathers of the council speak of members of the Church that have this spiritual close relationship, they mean the entire Church that includes the Church triumphant, Church suffering, and the pilgrim or militant Church.¹⁸ This spiritual close

relationship among the various members of the Church enables greater spiritual services of each member towards the other with what they are gifted with spiritually for all to realise their ultimate spiritual goal which is perfect union with God, i.e. eternal life.

From all this teaching therefore what is clear is that spiritual closeness is the work of the Holy Spirit and it is born out of the relationship with God. It is also about the relationship with God and neighbour spiritually. It is an interior life affair and may have physical manifestations where physical presence is possible. Those who are involved in spiritual close relationships are connected spiritually and the relationship is effective.

Spiritual Closeness within the context of COVID-19 Pandemic

The COVID-19 pandemic withdrew everyone from the social life and activities of the world into interior life. In this interior life, each was brought into face-to-face encounters either with themselves or with God. Thus, families who erstwhile had no time to be together were made to stay together in the same house. In these encounters, it became a moment of self-examination with God and with family members. In addition, this withdrawal enables one to realise the value of many people whose physical presence they have always taken for granted. While much activity in this period of seclusion takes place interiorly in the minds, hearts, and spirits, the urge to connect with that one is deprived physically heightened. Also when the urge of love towards the poor, the aged, the sick, and the troubled heightens, one is equally left worried about how best to reach them. Connection to people at such moments is left to the ability of one to be spiritually close to people. Unfortunately, many people either do not know or are not used to how to engage in spiritual closeness to people as much as needed especially at moments like the COVID-19 pandemic.

One of the major tools for spiritual closeness is the use of imagination. This is especially good for praying with those whom one is not with physically. From what Janet Schaeffler calls “praying within the communion of Saints”,¹⁹ it means with the power of imagination, visualise their presence similar to what is done with spiritual beings like God, and the saints at prayers. The imagination and visualising can be supported with any image or

picture of the person (s) one so wished to present. With this, spiritual connection is enabled. In such spiritual connection and presence through the use of imagination, prayer can be done with such person(s). When such kinds of spiritual activities take place, one's sense of aloneness can be reduced drastically. The effect of such spiritual activities can equally be felt by both one and the other(s) so brought into spiritual closeness and spiritual activities through imagination.

This kind of spiritual closeness can equally be engaged in by those who have an agreed time of prayer even though they are not physically present to each other. Their faithfulness to the time and the nature of the prayer, the concern, and the intention of each of them at such prayer enables them to remain connected and engaged in the spiritual relationships despite the situation of social distance and physical absence.

Of tremendous importance for spiritual closeness is the Liturgical celebration. The Liturgy is the prayer of the Church and the entire Church: Church Triumphant, Church Suffering, Church militant is brought together spiritually irrespective of distance and physical absence. In the Liturgical celebration, nothing obstructs spiritual closeness except lack of spiritual disposition. No liturgical celebration is private strictly speaking because the entire liturgical prayers and activities have nothing exclusive and private from the beginning to the end. When therefore it is celebrated, the awareness of the presence of the entire Church enables an individual to feel the spiritual closeness they share with others. Whether one is present during the celebration or not, this awareness that as it is celebrated, one was spiritually present at it with others, enables spiritual closeness.

The priest who presides over such liturgical celebration has a great role to play in this ensuring the awareness of the spiritual closeness that takes place during the liturgical celebration. One of the ways is while at the celebration, he should not be thinking of an empty Church but a Church filled spiritually with members. In this, he should celebrate the Mass as if he is with them physically, using his imagination to have them on the pews participating in the liturgical celebration. Their known intentions should be remembered and those not known should equally be prayed for. Spiritually, they should be engaged in every part of the Liturgy

such as areas of responses and where he needs to give them anything such as a kiss of peace and as well Holy Communion. It is because of the nature of spiritual closeness at the liturgical celebration that the Church still ensures that Mass is celebrated in a parish that has little or no Church attendance, for its spiritual good for the Christian community and the good of the outstation communities.

Furthermore, in this time of social media, cell phones, and many means of communication, spiritual closeness has been very much enabled especially where physical presence is not possible. These enable people to hear each other and even to have a visual encounter with each other. Expression of feelings either through writing by text messages or in verbal expressions through phone calls is made possible. This means can be used meaningfully for spiritual activities that enable the realisation of the good (spiritual and temporal) of those involved. As a means of strengthening relationship which includes the spiritual, John Paul II in his 1991 World Communication Day Message teaching about the Communication media said: “In the Christian view, the communication media are wonderful instruments at man’s disposal, under God’s providence, for building closer and more enlightened relationships between individuals and throughout the human family.”²⁰ Though they can be monitored and sometimes some are not safe for expressions as much as one would have loved to, one only has much to fear especially when one is using this means for sinful activities.

Spiritual closeness is equally possible for those who are not educated enough to use social media. In some parts of Africa, it is often said that thought of the other and call of their name even though far away can be felt by the other in some ways. At such moments, for example, they are immediately filled with the thoughts of each other. It means therefore that at moments such as the COVID-19 pandemic, what should not be lost is the thought of each other. Once the thoughts of each other are maintained, and people remember each other in prayers and good wishes, spiritual connection and feel of each other are possible.

Finally therefore people’s hearts, minds, and spirits should be well disposed towards everyone irrespective of distance and physical absence. It is a time each should fill themselves with the

prayerful thoughts of others as much as possible. These others include not just the living but also the dead. When this is done, we would remain spiritually close to each other.

Conclusion

This paper has sought to provide a spiritual panacea toward bridging the gap in our relationship with one another in this era of the COVID-19 Pandemic. It is what spiritual closeness entails. It is the life of any relationship, whether social and physical, or spiritual. The lack of it and the failure to pay attention to it has been responsible for the and loneliness suffered by so many people in the world even among those living physically together. When God-centred spiritual relationship is engaged in, the spiritual good of the people is promoted. One of the positive things COVID-19 Pandemic brought to people's awareness is the treasure of spiritual closeness that is necessary for both healthy relationships with God and neighbour. However, let it be stated that this paper does not deny the good of social, psychological, and physical closeness among people. They have their good since each of them serves a component of human life. The paper only seeks to emphasise the fact that spiritual closeness has a lot to offer where other forms of closeness, especially social closeness and physical presence are either difficult or impossible.

Endnotes

¹. Cf. Chester P. Michael, *An Introduction to Spiritual Direction: A Psychological Approach for Directors and Directee* (New York: Paulist Press, 2004), 11

². Donatus P. Ukpong, "Presence and Effect of Pentecostalism in Nigeria." 11. www.giopentNet/.../presence-and-impact-of-pentecostalism-in-nigeriapdf, accessed on 12-11-2021

³. Chris Nwaka Egbulem, in *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*, ed. Michael Downey (Bangalore: Theological Publication in India, 2003), 18.

⁴. Dominique Zahan, "Some Reflections on African Spirituality" in *African Spirituality: Forms, Meanings and Expressions*, ed. Jacob K. Olupona (New York: The Crossroad Publishing Company, 2006), 5.

⁵. John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* (London: Sheldon Press, 1969), 55-56.

6. Cf. James A. Wiseman, *Spirituality and Mysticism: A Global View* (New York: Orbis Books, 2006), 51; Charles J. Healey, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction to the Heritage* (New York: St. Pauls, 2014), 6.
7. Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in Catholic Tradition*, 40.
8. Charles J. Healey, *Christian Spirituality: An Introduction to the Heritage*, 33.
9. Jordan Aumann, *Christian Spirituality in Catholic Tradition*, 67-68.
10. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, Third Edition Translated from Original Manuscript by John Clarke (Washington D.C.: ICB Publications, 1996), 287.
11. Therese of Lisieux, *Story of a Soul: The Autobiography of St. Therese of Lisieux*, Third Edition Translated from Original Manuscript by John Clarke, 254.
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13. *Lumen Gentium* 46.
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15. *Lumen Gentium* 4.
16. *Lumen Gentium* 7.
17. *Lumen Gentium* 13.
18. *Lumen Gentium* 49-50.
19. Janet Schaeffler, *The Spirituality of the Catechist: Feeding Your Soul, Growing in Faith, Sharing with Others* (New London, 2014), 79.
20. John Paul II, "1991 World Communication Day Message: Media and Unity and Progress of the Human Family" in *Church & Social Communication: Basic Documents*, Second Edition, Introduced and Edited by Franz- Josef Eilers (Manila: Logos (Divine Word) Publications, 1997), 249.