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From the Editor: The medium is the message

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The **medium** is the message

Pat Fitzpatrick CSSp

*The medium? The blast of a bomb outside government buildings,
a killer with a shotgun on an island beach.
Mayhem in Norway, indiscriminate killing.*

*The message? "I kill what I don't like.
I bomb and blast what I oppose."*

On what would have been his 100th birthday this past July, many articles were written, many radio programs aired to honour Marshall McLuhan — Winnipeg born, University of Toronto professor, guru to thousands. One of his memorable teachings was “The medium *is* the message.”

At Mass sometimes people have difficulty understanding the accent of the medium — the homilist. As a result, the message — the teaching, the story, the parable — doesn’t communicate. At that famous march in Washington no one had difficulty understanding the message of Martin Luther King: “I have a dream” — the medium himself *was* the message.

Jesus knew his audience

Jesus was such a medium — he knew his audience: fishermen, shepherds, farmers, small town traders, women, sometimes children, those who needed healing. One writer summed them up as “the last, the least, the lost and the little.” Jesus’ way of life spoke to them. So did his words.

Jesus spent a long time taking in his surroundings: a cloud, a mountain, a glass-like lake, a churned-up lake, meals (more than anything else, perhaps — he went from meal to meal, from house to house), a last supper. He noticed how farmers, shepherds and fishermen went about their work. He noticed how various plants grew.

He noticed the life of women in their homes — how they prepared food, how they baked and cooked, their concern for the sick members of the family. He accepted invitations to their meals. He talked religion with them at a well, and in their homes. He connected religion to their everyday life.

Who remained with him to the bitter end? His women friends. They stood their ground when all the men had hurried into hiding. And one of them, perhaps the most unlikely one, Mary of Magdala, became his resurrection messenger to the locked-in, fear-filled men.

Then and now, his message takes different twists and turns — we need ‘mediums’ to convey it to our world: parents, religion teachers, homilists, catechists, storytellers, co-workers, journalists, film makers, the audio-visually skilled. Far too

often ‘mediums’ convey the message in a language that is foreign, abstract, cerebral, out of this world. Action verbs become abstract nouns: ‘he became flesh and dwelt among us’ becomes ‘incarnation’; ‘he took, he blessed, he broke, he gave’ becomes ‘transubstantiation.’ Such language addresses only the brain — and, more often than not, only the clerical brain.

Hot and Cool

Marshall McLuhan divided media into hot and cool. ‘Hot’ is cerebral, rooted in the printed word and in technical language. It distances the hearers. It pushes them away. Theological language is hot.

‘Cool’, on the other hand, invites people to participate. “Come and see” was how Philip invited Nathanael to get to know Jesus. Ritual is cool. It includes symbols, rites, prayers, stories, movement, bodily postures, responses, colours, feasts, seasons. Ritual that’s really real speaks to and transforms the whole person. Cool works best in our audio-visual age.

The best religion teachers (starting with mothers) have always known this. Bring a child to church and walk through the Stations of the Cross. Speak to that child about the Tabernacle or the crucifix or the stained glass windows. Let that young person finger the rosary beads, dip his/her hand in the holy water font and really trace the Sign of the Cross. Show that child how to genuflect (even if your knees no longer reach the floor).

Jesus the storyteller

Talk theology or canon law to people and you soon lose them. Tell them a story and you hold them in the palm of your hand. Jesus told stories — he taught through parables. Occasionally he yielded to his disciples’ request, “What does that mean?” by explaining some of these stories. But parables and similes were his unforgettable way of talking about God and life, good and evil, relationships among people: “It’s like this ...” To these he added ritual — in particular the ritual of the Eucharist. He *took* the bread, *said* the blessing, *broke* the bread and *gave* it to his disciples. (An aside: as he did this, he didn’t turn his back on them.)

“We become what we behold,” wrote English poet, William Blake. Our liturgy is an ancient, yet ever new medium of our message. Its stories and rituals, its words and silences, its ‘smells and bells’ present a multi-media expression of our belief. Our Catholic faith flows through our veins. Cool is what counts. ■