

THE MEDIA:

A Fascinating Challenge for the Family

television
images
blogs
magazines
movies
radio
internet
advertising
video
network

Twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week, twelve months a year, the media are there, much like the air we breathe. The media wake us up, stimulate our thinking, and follow us everywhere, constantly bombarding us with words and images, sounds and colors, constantly offering entertainment, information and advertising.

The omnipresent media have immense power, because for most of us they are our main means of information and formation. The media condition, modify, model and even determine our ways of thinking and our ways of living at the personal, family and societal levels. They can alter public opinion, shape our attitudes and transform our vision of reality.

The media have become a large window into life and human thought. Day after day, they present us with the latest tragedies and achievements, beliefs and feelings, values and ideas of the men and women of our time.

With almost endless possibilities to inform and educate, the media have a positive, real and immense potential to promote human and family values. But they also have the capacity to harm the family by presenting a false vision of life, love, family, morality and religious beliefs.

Faced with this invasion of our lives and of our families by the television, radio, movies, newspapers, magazines, and the Internet, we have two choices. We can either

accept it all without distinction or we can stop and think about how media content affects us, and choose only what builds up our humanity and enriches us intellectually, morally and socially.

An urgent priority

Day after day, in efforts to entertain us and remain profitable, the media present families with challenges. Too often, the media disrupt family life with sensationalism, moral relativism, vulgarity, the exploitation of sexuality and of violence; however, the media can also be a positive and invaluable source of learning.

Christian parents, knowing that the education of their children is



radio
movies television

primarily in their care, soon realize they must make decisions about which content enriches and which impoverishes their family life. Families can train themselves to view the media with a critical eye, rooted in their faith and a passion for the truth. What's more, we can begin to take concrete steps to increase the positive content of the media, so that it more often defends the freedom and dignity of each person.

As Pope John Paul II reminded us in his apostolic exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* (no. 43), "the family possesses and continues still to release formidable energies capable of taking man out of his anonymity, keeping him conscious of his personal dignity, enriching him with deep humanity and actively placing him, in his uniqueness and unrepeatability, within the fabric of society."

Pope Benedict XVI adds: "The direct duty to work for a just ordering of society...is proper to the lay faithful."ⁱ How can we overlook the extraordinary power of the media as we respond as individuals and families to this call to promote truth, justice and the common good in public life?

Might it be possible for us to lend our voice to the media to bring out the importance of the sacred nature of human life, and the respect that is due to the family founded on marriage between a man and a woman as the basic unit of society? Could we learn as families to promote true freedom and love through such powerful means of solidarity?

This is what we are called to as part of our baptism – our mission to be Christ's apostles. He has told us: "I am

the way, the truth and the life." We are walking in his footsteps. He is the one who sends us into the world to be its yeast, salt and light. He is counting on us today, as he counted on the early Christians, to build a social and political culture inspired by the Gospel.

"An urgent priority today is also found in the need to present the patrimony of Catholic tradition, its values and content, and the entire spiritual, intellectual and moral heritage of Catholicism, in culturally up-to-date terms."ⁱⁱ

A historic opportunity

If we want to build a civilization of love and bring about a culture of life, the hour has come to start believing that we have a unique contribution to make to Canadian society. We have something to say, and other people need to hear it. Because, in fact, with Christ we know the way to true happiness! And who doesn't want to be happy?

We have a holistic vision of the human person, which includes each person's indisputable dignity and inviolable rights – beginning with the right to life. We are offering a vision of society as a human community whose members, all children of the same God and Father, are united in their pursuit of the common good.

Today, so many current events and hot issues call for Christian families to become involved: euthanasia and abortion, poverty and violence, pornography and the hypersexualization of society, assisted procreation and embryonic stem cell research, attacks on the Church, and more.

Our voices are needed to defend not only the value and sacredness of human life, but also marriage between a man and a woman, and the genuine needs and rights of children. As Pope Benedict XVI reminds us, "The need to uphold and support marriage and family life is of particular importance, precisely because it pertains to the foundation of every culture and society."ⁱⁱⁱ

It is up to us to show our children that our Canadian culture has taken inspiration from the Judeo-Christian tradition. It is from this tradition that we have developed our respect for life and human dignity, our love of family, our tolerance, our desire for co-operation and peace, our welcoming attitude towards immigrants, and our desire for justice, freedom and equality.



Participants or Spectators?

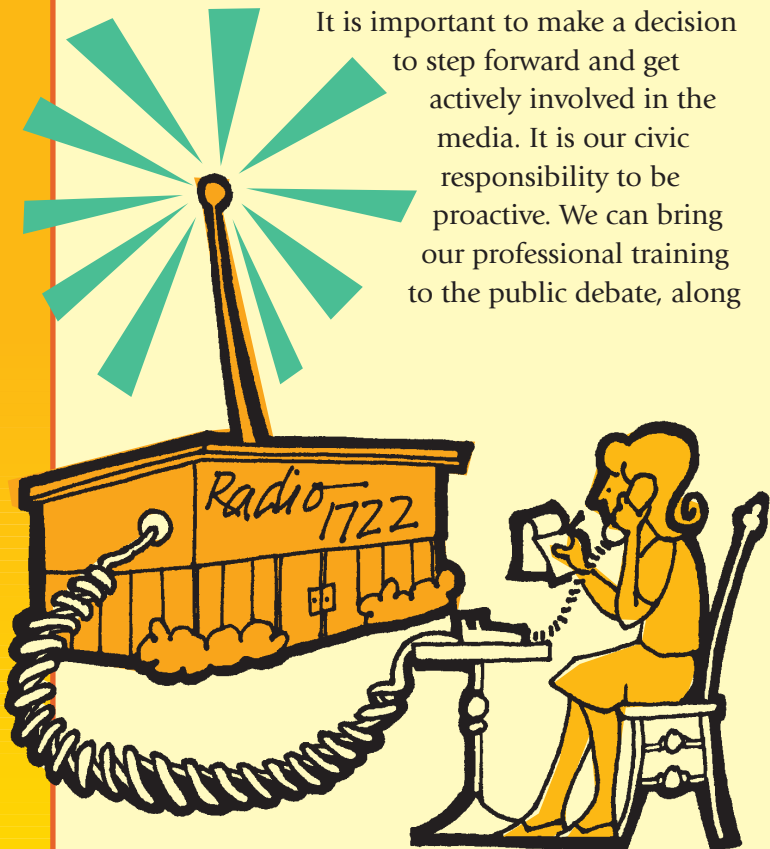
Given the importance of the media in educating and forming the conscience of children, many parents refuse to see their family be tossed about by the media's ideas and values. Instead, they take action by witnessing their own values and sharing their opinions.

They put aside their fears and indifference, and send a letter to the editor or phone a call-in show. They even get online and start publishing their views on a blog or website. They aren't trying to impose their ideas on others, but they are offering another point of view, a believer's perspective on current events. In service to the common good, they look for and offer the good news!

Stepping forward

Public opinion is formed by the active involvement of citizens who contribute to shaping it. Shouldn't we do our part? Denise Bombardier, a television personality and journalist, stirs us by saying: "The problem is that you are discreet believers. Stop whispering and speak out to proclaim Christian values with conviction and courage. Regain your sense of just indignation!"^{iv}

It is important to make a decision to step forward and get actively involved in the media. It is our civic responsibility to be proactive. We can bring our professional training to the public debate, along



with our opinions and beliefs. We can speak out as parents, citizens, and specialists in our fields. We can try to create a climate of trust with members of the media, by interacting with them and entering into a constructive dialogue.

Letting in the Light

While the beginning of the third millennium finds many people searching for meaning in a whirlwind of often contradictory ideas and values, we as Christ's disciples have never had access to more powerful and effective means to communicate our views on life.

For example, the worldwide Internet culture, interactive and multi-media, is a unique opportunity for us to spread the eternal Good News in today's language. We

Media-Savvy Parenting

Becoming savvy media consumers is quite a challenge! Children today are practically born with their hands in the media. They are captivated by the media from a very early age.

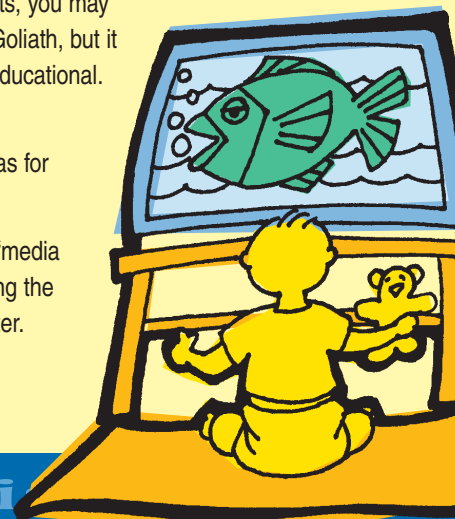
It is in our families that we first learn to use the powerful tools that the media represent, and to use them moderately, critically, vigilantly and prudently.

In the words of Pope John Paul II, "Even very young children can be taught important lessons about the media: that they are produced by people anxious to communicate messages; that these are often messages to do something — to buy a product, to engage in dubious behaviour — that is not in the child's best interests or in accord with moral truth; that children should not uncritically accept or imitate what they find in the media."^{vi}

It's an enormous task. As parents, you may feel like you are David against Goliath, but it is possible to make the media educational. It's all about choice and control.

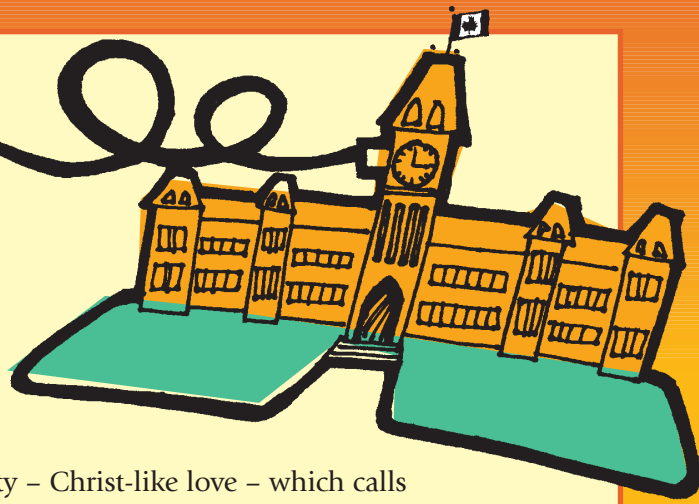
Here are some constructive ideas for becoming a media-savvy family:

1. Set a maximum amount of "media time" per day and avoid using the TV as an electronic babysitter.



must seize the historic chance that cyberspace offers us: a place for sharing, exchange, dialogue and friendship.

At this turning point in our civilisation, each individual act counts. Say what you think and believe. Share the truth that you received as a gift by presenting it as something that brings happiness. In this way, Christians will help their children and all people to grow; to develop greater spiritual maturity; to be more conscious of their humanity; to be more responsible and more open to others, especially the poor and the most vulnerable; to be more involved in giving, and giving of themselves; and to be more ready to love.



It is charity – Christ-like love – which calls us to share the deepest meaning of our lives. This is the kind of love that we are invited to by Pope Benedict XVI: “Love is possible, and we are able to practise it because we are created in the image of God. To experience love and in this way is to cause the light of God to enter into the world.”^v

etically born with computer keyboards and portable media players in their

2. For younger children, choose stimulating and age-appropriate shows. Watch them together and discuss the content.
3. Invite adolescents to choose the shows they will watch, within certain guidelines.
4. Help children see the difference between real and fictitious images presented online or in ads, movies and TV shows.
5. Choose movies or videos wisely by checking out reliable websites that offer critical reviews. Some parents even view the movies in advance.
6. Set up parental controls on your TV and Internet account, limiting your children's access to certain shows and sites.
7. Prohibit certain types of communication or certain shows. Carve out media-free times and do something together as a family.
8. Set a good example by using the media moderately and selectively yourself.
9. Organize a film club for teens, followed by discussion and sharing.
10. Learn to use the Internet together with your children. Set up the computer in a common area so you can supervise its use.
11. Create an Internet club and a “cyberfaith” community to spread good news, such as charitable initiatives, celebrations, life stories, and more.



12. Create an association of parents or viewers to make your voice heard among producers, publicists and public authorities. Tell them what you appreciate, and what you don't like.
13. Pray for everyone who works in the media.

internet movies advertising
 advertising television radio

Be a Witness!

The media are always looking for witnesses – people who can share something unexpected, something that can touch the hearts of their readers, listeners or viewers.

The father who appears on a television program to talk about the difficulties and joys of having a disabled son is being a witness. The woman who calls in a radio talk show because she regrets a past abortion is being a witness. The student who writes to a newspaper to support teen chastity education is being a witness.

Passionate, convincing, nuanced, joyful, natural, energetic and pro-active, witnesses talk about their lives, struggles, questions and hopes. Their attitude, the intonation of their voice and the look in their eyes often speak a lot louder than any argument they can make.

Witnessing is the essence of media content. All it takes is a brief interview or a letter to the editor of a newspaper to witness to others about what gives meaning to our work and our lives. We can simply say: "I got this idea when I was reading the Gospel... I am doing this in Christ's name."

As parents, we can prepare our children to be witnesses by setting an example. We can also encourage them if they are thinking of becoming journalists, artists, writers, producers or directors. Who knows? Perhaps they will create many effective witnesses – movie and TV characters, or heroes in plays and novels, who will personify Christian values for a wide audience.

"Media Workshop 101"

What can you do if something in the media gets to you? Maybe it's a show. You might hear a journalist make a comment that you agree with. You may want to express your agreement and say thank you!

Who says you can't express your opinion? The media are there for you, too. All you have to do is get involved. There's a new way for you to get savvy about making the media work for you: a "Media Workshop"! This is a unique opportunity for sharing between friends or between parents and children, to make your ideas heard and to learn to communicate effectively with the media.

All you need is a small team and a network of friends who are willing to speak up through letters to the editor, opinion pages, call-in shows, blogs, etc. Some news outlets even ask their audience for suggestions.

Getting started

- Get together with the members of your "Media Workshop" – at someone's home, at the parish, or at another location.
- Everyone brings an article or two that has struck them recently and that they would like to respond to. Brainstorm on the content of your letters.
- Everyone finds a quiet spot to write their letter. If you like, invite all to show their letters to the rest of the group to hear comments

Welcome to the "blogosphere"!

With the arrival of blogs and podcasting, a revolution has gotten underway in the realm of media. To start a personal blog – an interactive website that allows cyber visitors to add commentary and information – is to enable yourself to freely spread ideas, opinions and audio and video files, without wondering whether the media will take them into consideration or ignore them. In addition, portable media players allow us, at the time and place that suits us, to listen to radio broadcasts or to view video files downloaded from the web, including from bloggers engaged in podcasting. It's your turn to get blogging!

- i Benedict XVI, *God is love* encyclical, no. 29.
- ii Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 555.
- iii Benedict XVI, Message on the occasion of World Communications Day 2006.
- iv Denise Bombardier, translation of an excerpt from a talk given at a national conference on "Christians and the Media Culture," St-Augustin-de-Desmaures, June 1992.
- v Benedict XVI, *God is love* encyclical, no. 39.
- vi John Paul II, Message on the occasion of World Communications Day 2004.



... that challenges your ideas, or an ad that goes against your values. ... feel indignant or sad, angry or frustrated and powerless... Or you

... and suggestions for improving the text. This can be a humbling experience!

- Send your letters to the appropriate people.

Day by day

- Stay up to date with the news: each member of the team can be responsible for daily reading one newspaper, listening to a certain show, or visiting a blog.
- Take notes about the ideas you have while reading, listening and browsing.
- Let everyone in your network know right away if you find an article, show or survey that requires a response.
- Keep files on specific topics (with press clippings and on-line texts).
- Prepare a list of e-mail and postal addresses and phone numbers of media contacts.
- Don't forget to keep learning about and growing in your faith.

Seize the moment!

- React quickly when the topic warrants it. Be pertinent, transparent, honest, authentic, competent and audacious.
- You don't have to be a "writer." Make your letter brief; stick to one point. Use clear ideas, simple words and short sentences.
- Offer something new related to current events. Make sure it can be verified with credible sources.
- Keep current and use arguments by experts in the appropriate field for inspiration.
- Remain positive, tolerant and even humorous. Avoid irony, aggression and a moralizing tone.
- One-liners, summaries and sound bites work well.
- Use arguments based on basic human values, as some members of the media are less open to religious points of view.

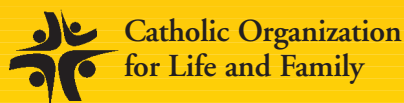


- Thank and encourage journalists if you like their work. Reserve "scoops" for them and send them a list of story ideas and contact people.

Don't forget...

- Community newspapers are often more accessible than bigger papers and may be happy to find new contributors. Propose a letter, an article, a personal story. Many people read these papers!
- To get the attention of your Member of Parliament, write to your local newspaper to express your opinion. If your letter is published, photocopy it and send it to your MP's office. It will have more impact than a personal letter.
- It is possible to protest publicly in the media, and it is often effective to make complaints directly to the sponsors.
- Look into organizations that exist to defend the interests of citizens, such as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (www.crtc.gc.ca) and Advertising Standards Canada (www.adstandards.com/en). There are also other resources you can use: ombudsmen, customer service departments, and press councils (in Quebec).

For more resources on Families and the Media: please visit the Episcopal Commission for Social Communications of the Canadian Conference of Catholic Bishops (C.C.C.B.) at <http://www.cccb.ca/Commissions.htm?CD=89>. In the "Documents" section, you will find five short texts to help families navigate through the various forms of media found in the family home: "Families and Internet", "Families and Advertising", "Families and Television", "Families and Movies", "Families and the News".



**Catholic Organization
for Life and Family**

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