

Christians and the mass media: open to the world, rooted in the Gospel

The “Logia” Project

An interview with Erik Hendriks

How to communicate Christian values to a wider public that often has a different approach? The criteria of much of the mass media are action, conflict, and simple, funny, often superficial messages. But is that really all people want to hear? Or can the message of universal fraternity also be offered through these means? We spoke with Erik Hendriks, who for 25 years has been running, together with others, a well-known Belgian TV production company which tries to transmit the values that have marked their lives since their youth. Ten years ago, a new experience was born. It is still ongoing and is now present in other countries.

Together with some friends and acquaintances, you asked yourselves how to be more present as Christians in the mass media of your country. Later the "Logia" project was born. Could you briefly tell us who is part of this experience and how it was born?

As CEO of a well-known TV production company, I encountered many people in our country, including a Christian woman who had been a minister for many years. Knowing that I was motivated by my Christian experience in trying to present values such as justice, solidarity, unity, universal brotherhood in our programs for a wide audience, she asked me if I had a project in mind. At the time she was president of a foundation committed to offering a vision enlightened by Gospel values which would be more present in the media.

In fact, for a number of years I had had a business which originated from professional research entrusted to an agency. The question we asked people was: in our secularized media - and more precisely in Northern Europe - is there a need for the Christian point of view? Surprisingly, the answer, even from people of non-Christian and post-Christian extraction, was clearly affirmative.

Together with some friends I then began to develop this idea. We realized that so often the view is restricted to the thought of the Church as an institution. It seemed to us, however, that Christianity can be an inspiration for many. "Logia" was born from this conviction: to

make public opinions of Christian inspiration and proactive concepts regarding current issues present in the media.

A think tank of 220 people

How did this project materialize, how is it articulated and what is its incidence?

We have created a think tank composed of people capable of influencing public opinion. The background of the components is very varied: from justice to economics, from social challenges to the world of culture, sport and education, public health; teachers, doctors, social workers, ambassadors, sponsors, etc.

We follow, and this was their choice, certain criteria. Even if "Logia" is not an official body of the Roman Catholic Church, those who are part of the project must be Christians. They belong to different denominations and are loyal to their own Church. They are all convinced of the importance of Christian values for today's society. Moreover, they cannot have a political mandate (there are two former government ministers) nor be representatives of the institutional Church, with the exception of two priests from Pax Christi who are committed to refugees.

There are currently 220 members of this think tank. Among them are many of a mature age but there are also young people, undergraduate and PhD students. There are 180 in Flanders and 40 in the French-speaking part of Belgium, where we began only two years ago. They participate in conferences, seminars, etc. to train themselves both in terms of multimedia communication and of content and spirituality. There are also moments of professional training on some technical aspects of the media (for example, how to write an opinion article for a newspaper or acquire digital strategies), on the teaching of the Church, etc.

To organize the meetings, take care of the content to be dealt with, contacts with the media and the training of members, an office was created where two full-time and two part-time people work, two in Flanders and one in the French-speaking part. The aim: to ensure that all the members of the think tank are prepared to offer their opinion in the media through interviews and testimonies in the form of writings and the audiovisuals of the digital age, each in their own name and never in the name of "Logia".

We have made some basic rules for the talks: *we are open to the world; we enter into dialogue and do not act in defense or offence; we find our inspiration in the Gospel and in the social teaching of the Church.*

After ten years the results are very positive: every year more than 250 talks are given in the most important media in Belgium (newspapers, TV and national radio) and there is an increasing presence also in social media. Currently some members of "Logia" are very

present in the public debate. Another important effect is that these people form a living Christian community.

Formation so as to present the Christian vision in an open, never defensive way

What topics have you tackled and what is the way ahead? What kind of echoes have you had from the public?

All the main current areas of interest have been addressed: poverty, justice, economics, architecture, ecology, health, sport, education, etc. To our surprise, the media have received our contributions positively, right from the beginning.

Some of our members who had never appeared in the media before are now present almost every week in a TV debate or in the newspapers; others maybe just once a year. The important thing, however, is that everyone is committed to bringing the Christian vision into the public debate in an open but never defensive way. The echoes of both the press and the general public have been very positive.

Fundamental to the support of this project are the monthly two-hour meetings in regional groups that meet in eight major cities immediately after work, including a meal together. The meetings are structured as follows: they begin with a testimony (10 minutes) of one of the members about how he or she tries to concretize his or her Christianity in the daily life of his or her field of work. Then we talk about current affairs in Belgium and also in the world. We also try to identify possibilities where we can contribute concretely to a certain topic: can something be done? how? and where? together with others? It is interesting, for example, what an architect can do in the media together with a doctor, a young man with a well-known professor, an entrepreneur with an educator, etc. The aim is always to contribute to the public debate with an aspect of the Christian vision. At the end of the meeting, practical agreements are made to present to the media.

If you talk with intellectuals, isn't there the danger that everything will remain just a nice theory? Do you have a particular method for the dynamics of your meetings?

A very interesting question. When we started, we immediately noticed that during the monthly meetings our conversations were very theoretical. So, we worked out a proposal with the staff. Every month, in each group (i.e. in each city) we begin, as I have already mentioned, with a testimony that answers the question: "How do you try to live as a Christian and what inspires you in daily life, for example, a particular phrase of the Gospel?"

This practice has brought about a real change. For many people it was not easy to say something about themselves as Christians. Some said: "I have given hundreds of speeches

in my life. But tonight, I did not sleep at the thought of having to talk about myself and my life as a Christian".

The effect? The gatherings have become more "meetings", a community has been created and even the contributions to the media have become more practical. Precisely for this reason, the interest of the media in our "stories" is growing.

In the media: everyone acts independently, informed by the Christian vision

How do you get into the newspapers or on TV? Could you give us an example of how you can affect public opinion?

The staff of "Logia" helps members to contact the media, it also provides help in writing, because they know how to write in a journalistic "language". Sometimes, for example, before a person goes to a television studio, we provide specific preparation. But the content always comes from each person, each person provides it themselves. It is then up to the journalist of that newspaper, website or TV to decide whether to publish that contribution or not. So far, our presentations have been much appreciated.

Increasingly, we also try to be explicit if the situation allows it. Once a member of "Logia", a psychiatrist and the director of a large university clinic, stated in an article that one should never lose hope in patients suffering from mental disorders. To explain himself, he used the image of the good thief who asked Jesus for forgiveness at the end of his life, there on the cross. He sent that contribution to an important, very secular magazine. We in the staff of "Logia" doubted that it would be published, because it was too explicit. But the young journalist, struck by this story that he did not know, published it. There were so many reactions to it on social media.

You are not institutionally linked to the Church and this perhaps gives you more freedom and more chance of being listened to by those who do not want to know anything about religion. How is your relationship with these people? And how do you relate to the bishops and other representatives of the various Churches?

Each one speaks independently, informed by the Christian vision, but is free. It is important to be independent, for various reasons. For me a first reason is that we lay people must take up our responsibility. I have always been touched by Jesus' prayer for his followers: that they may be in the world, but not of the world¹. It is also important for the media themselves, who so often consider "Christian" issues as being only those concerning the position of the Church on certain issues: the celibacy of priests, abortion, abuses.... The Christian vision, on

¹ cf. Jn 17:15. Similarly Paul's exhortation in Rom 12:2: "Do not conform yourselves to this world, but let yourselves be transformed by renewing your way of thinking, so that you may discern God's will, what is good, pleasing and perfect".

the other hand, comprises every aspect of life: justice, economics, ecology, urbanization, social issues, and so on.

From the very beginning, the then Cardinal and some bishops have supported us along these lines. Others were perhaps perplexed, and I understand them. In the meantime, they have seen how we work and how we have built good relationships.

There is a lot of consultation. We had one very unexpected result: two years ago, the current Cardinal of Belgium, Archbishop De Kesel, updated Pope Francis of our experience and he, to our surprise, invited us to a private audience. 120 of us from "Logia" were present. To prepare ourselves, we held a day of formation with all the members in Rome on the writings of Pope Francis and others. Representatives of other Churches were also present and part of the formation session was led by them. In his talk, Francis said: "I encourage you to highlight, through your participation in the public debate, that the Gospel is a way of humanization in the school of Jesus," and he invited us to develop through our meetings "bonds of fraternity to make visible this communion of differences, of which the Holy Spirit is the master, the project leader, to grow, through your witness of life, a culture of encounter and dialogue in the midst of society."²

Interview by Heike Vesper

² Address to the delegation of the association "Logia" from Belgium, May 12, 2018.