MESSAGE OF THE HOLY FATHER JOHN PAUL II
FOR THE 29th WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

"Cinema: Communicator of Culture and of Values"[Sunday, 28 May 1995] *Dear Brothers and Sisters:*This year, on the occasion of World Communications Day, I would like to invite you to think about the cinema as "a communicator of culture and of values". As you certainly will know, during the current year celebrations are being held around the world to commemorate the first centennial of this special and widespread medium of expression, now so easily accessible to all.The Church has often pointed out the importance of the communications media in transmitting and promoting human and religious values (cf. Pius XII, *Miranda prorsus*, 1957) and the special responsibilities that ensue for those who work in this difficult field. The Church, in fact, considering the progress that has been made and the developments that have taken place in the world of social communication in recent decades, is well aware both of the dangerous conditioning power enjoyed by the mass media as well as of the capacity that they offer, if wisely used, of being useful for evangelization.As I wrote in the Message published on the occasion of the World Communications Day of 1989, "the question confronting the Church today is not any longer whether the man in the street can grasp a religious message but how to employ the communications media so as to let him have the full impact of the gospel message" (John Paul II, *Message for World Communications Day, 1989*).Among the media of social communication, the cinema is by now a universal and esteemed medium from which messages are often sent which are capable of influencing and conditioning the choices of the public, and especially young people, in a form of communication that is based not so much on words as on concrete events, expressed in images which impact greatly on the viewers and on their subconscious.The cinema, since it was invented, while sometimes giving rise to criticism and disapproval on the part of the Church on account of some aspects of its extensive output, has also often dealt with themes of great meaning and value from an ethical and spiritual point of view.I would like to recall here, for example, the numerous film presentations of the life and passion of Jesus and of the lives of the saints, still available in many film libraries, and which are useful, above all, to animate numerous cultural, recreational and catechetical activities undertaken by many dioceses, parishes and religious institutions. From those beginnings a rich body of religious cinema has been produced, with a large number of films that have had significant influence on many people, albeit with the limitations that the passage of time, inevitably, tends to highlight.Human and religious values that deserve attention and praise are often present, not only in films that make direct reference to the tradition of Christianity but also in films of different cultures and religions. This confirms the importance of the cinema as a vehicle for cultural exchange and as an invitation to openness and reflection in dealing with realities foreign to our upbringing and mentality. In this sense, the cinema serves to overcome distance and acquires that dignity particular to culture which is "a specific dimension of the existence and being of man. It creates among the persons within each community a complex of bonds, determining the interpersonal and social character of human

existence" (John Paul II, *Message for World Communications Day, 1984*).To those who work in the field of cinema, I would like to extend a warm invitation not to abandon this important cultural element, because it is not in accordance with the most authentic and deep demands and expectations of the human person to produce films which are devoid of content and which are aimed exclusively at entertainment, or have the sole motive of increasing the size of the audience.As happens with all the media of social communication, the cinema, as well as having the power and the great merit of contributing to the cultural and human growth of the individual, can oppress freedom—particularly of the most weak—when it distorts the truth (cf. Pius XII, *Miranda prorsus*, 1957) and when it presents itself as the mirror of negative types of behavior, using scenes of violence and sex offensive to human dignity and "tending to excite violent emotions to stimulate the attention" of the viewer (John Paul II, *Message for World Communications Day, 1981*). The attitude of those who irresponsibly bring about degrading imitative behavior whose harmful effects can be read about each day in the pages of the newspapers cannot be defined as free artistic expression. As the Gospel reminds us, only in the Truth are we made free (cf. Jn 8:32).The urgency of such a problem in our society, that seems too often to draw negative models from the daily stimuli offered by the cinema, as well as by television and by the newspapers, urges me to extend, once again, a pressing appeal both to those who are responsible for the industry—so that they may commit themselves to working with professionalism and responsibility—as well as to the viewers—so that they may know how to react in a critical way in the face of the ever more demanding proposals offered by the world of the media, including the cinema, and be ready to judge between what may be an opportunity for growth, or an occasion of harm.When the cinema, in obedience to one of its principal aims, presents us with an image of how we are as human beings, it must provide, from a basis in reality, worthwhile opportunities for reflection on the concrete conditions in which we live. It must therefore offer material for reflection on issues such as social commitment, and the condemnation of violence, of all forms of exclusion, of war and of injustice. These concerns, often dealt with by the cinema in its hundred-year history, cannot leave indifferent all those who are worried about the fate of humanity. This means encouraging those values that the Church has at heart and contributing directly to their spread through a medium which so easily and effectively reaches the public (cf. Pius XII, *The Ideal Film*, 1955).On this day above all, on the threshold of the third millennium, it is essential to ask ourselves definite questions, not avoiding the problems but looking for answers and solutions. In this context there is no question of not giving the cinema the place and the value that is its due. However, I would appeal to the responsible persons at every level to be fully aware of the great influence that they exercise on people and of the mission that they are called upon to pursue at this present time which has such urgent need of universal assertions of peace and tolerance. This is simply to recall those values which are to be found at the heart of that dignity which has been given to each one of us by God the Creator.Those that work in the sensitive field of cinema must as communicators remain open to dialogue and to the reality that surrounds them. They must undertake to highlight the most important realities with films that provoke reflection, in the awareness that this approach, which permits the drawing together of different cultures and of the people that live them, will bring about positive results for all.In order to be sure that the messages that the cinema might offer for the human and spiritual growth of those who use it are fully understood, it is also important to take care of the education of viewers in the language of film which often departs from the direct representation of reality in order to use systems of symbols not always easy to comprehend. It is very useful when, even in school, teachers devote attention to this problem, sensitizing the students to images and gradually developing their critical attitude towards an idiom that is by now an integral part of our culture; because "the application of communications technology has been a mixed blessing, and its use for good purposes requires sound values and wise choices on the part of individuals, the private sector, governments, and society as a whole" (*Aetatis Novae*, 1992).While the memory of the statements and of the reflections that accompanied the celebration of the Year of the Family just completed is still with us, I think it important to

remind families that to them also is entrusted the duty of educating their children in an accurate reading and understanding of the films that enter their homes each day, thanks to television, and to the videocassette recorder which even the youngest children seem capable of using.In the context of the necessary education of viewers, the social component of the cinema must not be forgotten. This could offer suitable opportunities for dialogue among those that use the medium, through an exchange of opinions on the issue in question. It is also very useful—especially for young people—to organize film circles where, with the guidance of qualified persons, they may learn to express themselves and to listen to others, in a constructive and serene exchange of opinions.Before concluding this message, I could not but draw attention to the distinctive duty that this matter of the cinema requires from all those who profess themselves to be Christians, who are aware of their own special mission in the world and who know well that their task is the proclamation of the Gospel, the good news of Jesus, "the Savior of all", to the people of their time.The cinema, with its vast possibilities, could become a powerful means of evangelization. The Church urges directors, film-makers and all those involved who profess themselves to be Christians and who work in the complex and unique world of the cinema, to act in complete consistency with their own Faith and to take courageous initiatives—even in the area of production—in order that through their professionalism the Christian message that is for each man and woman the good news of salvation might be more present in the world.The Church feels obliged to offer, above all to young people, that spiritual and moral help without which it becomes almost impossible to function in a worthwhile manner. It must take concrete steps, where necessary, with suitable initiatives of support and encouragement.In the hope that these words could be for all a motive of reflection and an occasion of renewed commitment, I send from my heart a special blessing to all those who, with their different tasks, work in the cinema industry and also to those who endeavor to use the cinema as an authentic vehicle of culture for the integral growth of each person and of society as a whole.*From the Vatican, January 6, 1995, The Epiphany of the Lord.*IOANNES PAULUS PP. II