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## **READING THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES**

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Thus, semiotics in principle is the discipline studying everything  
which can be used in order to lie.<sup>1</sup>

Umberto Eco

### **Introduction**

The Vatican II Document *Gaudium et Spes* (The Church in the Modern World) obliges the church in reading of the signs of the times in relating with the modern world. *Gaudium et Spes*, # 4 states:

To carry out such a task, the Church has always had the duty of scrutinizing the signs of the times and of interpreting them in the light of the Gospel. Thus, in language intelligible to each generation, she can respond to the perennial questions which people ask about this present life and the life to come, and about the relationship of the one to the other. We must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its explanations, its longings, and its often dramatic characteristics.<sup>2</sup>

This document itemizes or enumerates the actions needed in reading the signs of the times such as “scrutinizing” and “interpreting”, “recognize” and “understand” as a duty of the

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<sup>1</sup>Umberto Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, 7.

<sup>2</sup>James H. Kroeger, ed., *Documents of Vatican Council II*, Pasay City: Paulines Publishing House, 2011, 230-1.

Church in relating with the world so that it can aptly respond to the relevant questions that people ask. Thus, the document tells us what to read – the signs – of the times. The document advises the people to read the signs of the times supposedly from the perspective of faith. Unfortunately, the document fails to show the people how to read these signs. Thus, there is a gap between the question on what and the question on how that the document glosses over. We are left groping in the dark on how to read these signs since they are not self-evident or self-explanatory signs; in fact, they are not simple but complex signs that we need to decipher. If this is the case, then we need a reading strategy in dealing with these signs. The absence of the how in reading the signs of the times in the document seems to suggest that reading the signs is taken for granted or the how of reading the times is entrusted to the people. In this way, the church seems to presume that the how of reading the signs of the times is unproblematic.

Moreover, theologians often quote the phrase “signs of the times” in their works and talks but they seldom explicate and expound the manner or mode of deciphering and unravelling the signs. They merely assume or guess the meaning of the phrase without methodically analyzing them. Thus theologians come up with different analyses of the signs of the times from different sources such as the ecclesiastical doctrines or social sciences. I believe that we need the mediation of the social sciences in reading the signs of the times and from that starting point, we can proceed to the theological interpretation of these signs. We therefore need the dialectical relationship of the social and theological sciences in interpreting the signs of the times. Thus, this paper is written to supply the lacuna of gap left open by the document so that the readers are guided or informed by these reading strategies. In this paper, we shall revisit the signs of the times in its general view and propose various ways in reading the signs. However, in the end, the people are responsible for making the reading of these signs.

### **Traditional Basis of the Signs of the Times**

In the Gospel of Matthew 16:1-4, the Pharisees and Sadducees demand a sign from Jesus. To quote:

The Pharisees and Sadducees came to Jesus and tested him by asking him to show them a sign from heaven. He replied, “When evening comes, you say, ‘It will be fair weather, for the sky is red,’ and in the

morning, 'Today it will be stormy, for the sky is red and overcast.' You know how to interpret the appearance of the sky, but you cannot interpret the signs of the times. A wicked and adulterous generation looks for a sign, but none will be given it except the sign of Jonah." Jesus then left them and went away (NIV).

Jesus' response to the question draws from a meteorological image such as the weather condition relying on the colour of the sky. For Jesus, the Pharisees and the Sadducees can readily interpret the weather but not the signs of the times. Jesus then castigated them for failing to read the signs of the times. Then, he turns to or shifts from meteorological image of the weather to the biblical image of the Prophet Jonah from the Old Testament.

As we know, Jonah was called by God to go to Nineveh but was resistant and evasive to God. He ran away from God but was brought to Nineveh. He could not escape his God-given mission. He was sent by God to Nineveh and was tasked to preach his message. However, he cannot escape the will of God. God brought him to Nineveh to realize his mission in preaching repentance and conversion because God is forgiving and compassionate. Jonah ran away from this mission because he could not face the traditional enemies of the Jews – the Ninevites – since to preach conversion to the Ninevites must begin from himself: He needs to forgive his enemies. The sign of Jonah is a sign of mission not just to the repentance and forgiveness of the Ninevites but also to himself because God is compassion and forgiveness.<sup>3</sup>

In the Document, *Mater et Magistra*, # 237 and 238, Pope John XXIII recommends the three stage process in reading the signs of the times.

*In reducing social principles and directives to practice, one usually goes through three stages: reviewing the situation, judging it in the light of these principles and directives, deciding what can and what should be done according to the mode and degree permitted by the situation itself.*

*These are the three stages that are usually expressed in the three terms: look, judge, act.<sup>4</sup>*

This three stage process involves the three actions of looking, judging and acting as a way of reading the signs of the times that

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<sup>3</sup>John F. Craghan, "The Book of Jonah and the Challenge to Forgive," *The Bible Today* 44, 2 (2007) 80-84.

<sup>4</sup>Pedro V. Salgado, OP, *Social Encyclicals: Commentary and Critique*, Quezon City: Garotech Publishing, 1992, 590.

responds to social questions. The process begins with the eyes of the observer that sees the situation, next, after seeing the world, the observer evaluates the situation by judging it and then, after judging the situation, the observer now acts in accordance with the judgment. This process follows the scientific method of observation and analysis. However, the action part is uniquely pastoral in its orientation because it moves us to action by planning the details of the course of action and by implementing it in that particular situation. This process is deemed to improve the situation by transforming it.

### **READING the Sign**

Reading seems to be an easy activity as long as you can recognize the sign and understand the meaning of it. In our education, we have been taught to read the alphabets and write sentences. In the process, we have been equipped with the skills of communication and have developed our linguistic competence. In this sense, you can immediately and readily read the signs.

However, knowing the language is not enough because reading is couched in a philosophical framework that orients our understanding of reading. There are different ways of conceiving the act of reading. First, reading can be likened to archaeology. In reading, one needs to excavate or dig the intention of the author buried in the sign. After painstaking excavation, the reader can grasp or capture the meaning intended by the author. Thus the reader is merely the spokesperson or representative of the absent author. Thus, reading in this sense is discovery since you need to uncover or discover the intention of the author. Once the meaning is known, the reader pinned it down.

Second, reading is like weaving where two distinct sets of yarns or threads are interlaced to form a fabric or cloth woven in a longitudinal (warp) and lateral (welf) threads. The way the warp and welf threads interlace with each other is called the weave. Like weaving, the signs are interwoven together and formed into a system. In this sense, reading is relating a sign with other signs in a system. The relationship of signs in a system produces a particular meaning. Thus, the meaning of a sign depends on their differential relationship in a system. Thus, meaning can change depending upon the position of the sign in a relationship within a system. Thus, the reader relates these signs in a system that produces a particular meaning. The

meaning of the signs cannot be pinned down once and for all since it relies on their relationship in a system.

The first concept of reading is defective because we know that the author is physically dead or absent and in effect we cannot access the authorial intention. Moreover, the alleged authorial intention in the passing of time has already been altered by series of interpretation and contaminated by various readings (such is the case of biblical exegesis). Thus, we posit that in reading the signs of the times, the author cannot safeguard the purity of intention and impose the preferred intention because readers vivify the sign by reading and rereading it.

Thus, we prefer the second concept of reading the signs of the times as weaving the signs in a system. In this reading, the author does not exercise authority or tyranny but only the relationship of the reader and the signs matters in this reading. The interaction between the reader and the signs produces unexpected and peculiar meanings so that we are surprised to know the fecundity and the diversity of experiences of people. In that way, we learn from these readings from people located from different parts of the world having different cultures.

### **Reading the SIGN**

Sign is not a simple and evident thing because it is a substitution. A sign substitutes for reality. In this sense, the sign stands in for something. Thus, we distinguish sign from reality. We do not have a direct or immediate access to reality; we only have the substitutional sign. In short, the reader cannot claim a privileged position as a ventriloquist of reality. The reader can only read the sign but not grasp reality as such. Moreover, sign is a relational thing. A sign is related to the users. The meaning is produced in the relationship between the sign and the user. The relationship is governed by the norm of society or convention of culture. The meaning is not privately owned by a sovereign individual or expert but publicly shared by the people who belong to that society sharing similar culture. Thus, the meaning is not just invented by the sole user from nowhere but is grounded in the culture of a given society. People understand the sign because they share the code that assigns the meaning.

There are various models in understanding a sign known as semiotics defined as the theory of sign. Semiotics provides us a mode

or manner of reading the signs. Signs seem to be easy to read, but as many semioticians show signs are complicated because they are linked to culture and ideology whose meanings are often hidden and cancelled from view. In this paper, we shall only mention three of them.

1. Saussurian Semiotics<sup>5</sup>

De Saussure proposed an algorithm of a sign by dividing it into two components, namely, the signified and the signifier. To illustrate:

S (Signified=Meaning/Concept)

Signifier (Signifier=Image/Word)

In this algorithm, the signified occupies the upper position that determines the meaning of a signifier in the lower position. De Saussure provided us an example:

Tree (as a concept/meaning)

Sign =

Tree (as an image/word)

The signified of a signifier is dependent on its relationship with the system. Thus a tree is not a grass, a dog or a pen in a system. Thus, the differential relationship in a system produces a peculiar meaning of a sign. Once it is signified, the signifier is fixed in a system that assigns its peculiar meaning.

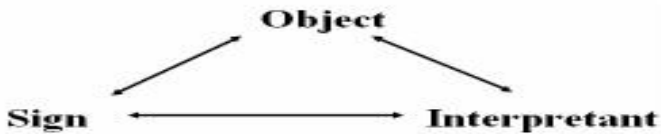
2. Piercean Semiotics<sup>6</sup>

Pierce proposed a triad of a sign, namely, a sign, an object and an interpretant. A sign implies an object (reality) and the meaning of that sign is dependent on the interpretant. The interpretant is not the interpretation but is related to the convention that guarantees the meaning of a sign. That convention is derived from the culture of a given society that publicly shares it. Thus, members of a society understand the meaning of a sign because they share the culture of that society.

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<sup>5</sup>See: Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, trans. Wade Baskin, New York: Philosophical Library, 1966.

<sup>6</sup>Charles Sander Pierce, *Semiotics and Significs*. ed., Charles Hardwick, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1977.



Sign is not isolated but related to other (sign relation) encompassing the sign itself, its subject matter called the object and the sign's meaning called its interpretant. Unlike Saussurian sign, the Peircean sign is productive or generative because it leads to more or further interpretants. Thus, the reader cannot pin down the sign because it leads to other signs not just in its relationship with other signs but its interpretants. Thus, the object determines the sign to determine another sign — the interpretant — to be related to the object as the sign is related to the object. As a sign of an object, the interpretant determines a further interpretant sign. This process is logically structured to reproduce or perpetuate itself indefinitely.

For example, an interpretant does not merely represent something as an object in the mind; instead it represents something as a sign that represents the object. The object (be it factual or fictional) determines the sign to an interpretant. The interpretant relies on human experience as a source of interpretation stored in the human mind. Thus, we have a series of signs that generates indefinitely in the process of interpretation.

### 3. Barthean Semiotics<sup>7</sup>

Barthes frequently interrogated specific cultural materials to expose the values of the bourgeois society hidden on those signs. He used semiotics in questioning these values. He divided the "social myth" into two layers, namely, the first order encompassing the denotative level and the second order encompassing the connotative level. The bourgeois values belonged to the second order level. Like Peircean semiotics, Barthean semiotics also acknowledges the production of series of sign from the denotative level to the connotative level of meaning. The denotative level reveals the hidden bourgeois values in society. Since it is cancelled, the denotative meaning is ideological. The meaning involves the agenda of the bourgeois society that justify its lifestyle and interest which Barthes wanted to bring out to our consciousness.

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<sup>7</sup>Roland Barthes, "Myth Today," in *Roland Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag, London: Vintage, 1993, 93-149.



He illustrated this analysis by drawing our attention to the photograph of a Negro saluting the French flag.

1. Signifier (the photograph itself)

2. Signified (Negro soldier) = 3.I. Signifier (Negro soldier saluting the French flag)

3.II. Signified (Negro soldier's loyalty qua justification of French imperialism/colonialism of Africa)

The photograph does not only show the Negro's loyalty to the French flag but also France's justification of colonization. The signifier hides the violence of imperialism and ennobles the colonization as exemplified by the Negro's salute to the French flag. Thus the photograph brings together the complex network of the Negro with France during the occupation justifying colonization as a positive action of France. This network implicates the colonizer (France) and the colonized (Negros) in an unequal relationship. Thus, the photograph carries an ideological content that sanitizes or hygienizes the meaning of imperial France.

From this semiotic survey, we can deduce some observations. First, sign is not a channel where you just transfer the meaning from one end to the other but it is a system in a web of differential relationship the meaning of which depends on its position in a system. Second, sign is generative because we cannot arrest the sign in its production of meanings as the object is transformed into a sign creating different interpretant. Third, sign is not transparent but opaque because it might have an ideological meaning attached to it. Without knowing



it, we may be deceived because rather than revealing, ideology cancels the reality using signs.

### **Back to Reading the Signs<sup>8</sup>**

What are we saying here? Simply put, reading the signs of the times is a complex process. It is not as simple as it appears in the document. It demands a lot of effort in carefully reading the signs of the times. This careful reading requires a critical perspective.

Let us go back to the three action process of looking, judging and acting.

1. Look: Here the eyes are equipped with power in capturing reality and producing knowledge of it. In the scientific method, the eyes of the scientists matter in the production of knowledge. Their gaze is powerful in that procedure by capturing or grasping the reality. The gaze becomes a mirror that reflects reality. However, we have to ask ourselves: Whose eyes are looking? We assume that these eyes belong to the hierarchy that observes reality and produces knowledge. Moreover, we assume that these eyes can claim universality and arrogate ventriloquism. These two assumptions are based on a modern science that believes in the universality of knowledge and ventriloquism of expertise.

2. Judge: Here after seeing, the eyes evaluate reality by judging it. As we know in logic and epistemology, judgment involves division by separating what is true and what is false, what is good and what is bad. This binary categorization in judgment disregards the gray areas and uncertain terrains of knowledge that can be detrimental to situation affected by this binarism. Although the judgment is based on social analysis of the situation supplied by the social sciences and theological reflection supplied by theological sciences, we are still unsure of the many ramifications and nuances of the situation that we are in some cases put in aporias of undecidability. We may inquire: Whose judgment are we going to follow? The judgment from an omnipotent eye can be omniscient too by taking the sovereign position of God that enables it to arbitrate the truth. That judgment is final and executory.

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<sup>8</sup>See: Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1997; Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trans. Alan Sheridan, New York: Vintage Books 1979; and also Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, London: Free Association Press, 1991.

3. Act: Here after judgment, one proceeds to implement it. The observation and evaluation are joined in practice by planning the details and implementing the courses of action in a given situation of the world. Whose action? The action is planned and programmed according to the judgment of the cannibalizing eyes that is imposed on the rest who will just follow its dictate. The action emanates from the eyes that observe and judge the situation by reducing the situation into a homogenous analysis.

What can we say? The actions are mentioned – looking, judging and acting – but the actor is elided. We may ask the question: Whose sight? Whose judgment? Whose action? Again we are back to the hegemonic actor acting in behalf of the rest in analyzing the situation of the world. This hegemonic actor arrogates to himself the status of being the ventriloquists of the people whose superior knowledge represents the world. His eyes are disembodied so that he can elevate himself from the rest.

We have to note that the actor is embodied. The actor is marked by race, class and sex, to name just a few. We assume that the actor is dominantly a white professional male. The actor is hidden ideologically so that he can install himself as a universal agent. Having arrogated the universal status, he can then view the situation from nowhere and everywhere. He takes the place of God. However, having a body means that the actor is located and situated. He cannot ubiquitously occupy different places at the same time and respect. Moreover, being embodied, his vision is limited and fragmented. He cannot have a complete knowledge of the situation of the world. He can know some bits and pieces of knowledge of the situation. Thus, the return of location dislodges the alleged universal status the privileged eyes and the meta-narrative of the sovereign ego.

Reading is positioned in a discourse. When we read, we deploy our linguistic competence in reading but, at the same time, we are also enmeshed or entangled in discourse. We are immersed in a net or web of discourse that we cannot get out from it but we play into it. There are available discourses around us, some of which are consciously taken up and others are unconsciously picked up. When we choose this discourse, we are positioned in it since it takes in a particular perspective of thought and practice. Since there are many available discourses, we cannot take them all. We expect conflict of positions in discourse. However, when we take up this discourse, we

have to justify our choice and interest. This choice and interest at the end can only be justified by what it advances and what it defends.

### **Modest Suggestions**

What can we suggest in reading the signs of the times in this paper? Let me enumerate three of them.

First, in reading the signs of the times, we need to consider the encounter between the reader and the signs. The reader is not a sovereign author of the signs where meaning emanates from and terminates in his sole consciousness. If that is the case, then we have a self-referential ego or consciousness. Thus, reading is an encounter between the sign and the reader. That encounter creates meaning to the reader. However, sign is not self-evident or self-explanatory. Sign can be multivalent or polysemic so that we cannot pin down the meaning of a sign in its finality. In determining the meaning of the sign, we need to disambiguate and decipher it in the process of discernment and argumentation.

Second, reading is plural. There are many different readers and there is no privileged position among them. We need to subject these readings into reflexivity and critique so that we will not dogmatize any reading. If the privileged eyes of the gods trick are dethroned and decentered, then we install the community as the source of knowledges and we need to listen to and learn from each other because we have the capacity to reason out based on our experiences. The production of knowledge is democratized because we allow participation of the community in search for truth. We cannot claim to have achieved a final or complete knowledge of reality; we can only modestly claim situated and partial knowledge of reality. This admission or recognition of our situated knowledge of reality opens the space for democratization of knowledge and the space for the alterity of the other. Thus, knowledge is a communal pursuit of the people in their desire to know more and better.

Third, reading is open-ended because sign can possess polyvalence or multivalence of meanings since it does not only emanate from a single source or authoritative consciousness but from a communal pursuit of knowledge and in democratic participation. We can never end reading and close the sign; we continue to read and reread signs as we relate them in our experiences in the ever-changing world. We can shift our perspectives because our experience can alter or

transform our reading of signs. We can never fix or fasten the sign in a one-to-one correspondence of truth but in a plurality of readers knowing or sharing different perspectives because of their different locations and identities that shape and reshape them. Thus, our reading is always provisional perhaps until further notice. In his sense, we encourage to continually reflect and critique our reading or misreading of the sign.

### **Provisional Conclusion**

What shall we conclude from here? As you may have noticed, the signs of the times have undergone transformation or translation from biblical source, to encyclical letter to semiotic philosophy. This transformation shows the complexity and difficulty in reading the signs of the times since traditional sources are insufficient in reading the signs of the times. We need to involve many participants in reading the signs of the times, not just the authority or the expert, but the whole church in their local situations and sustain this reading in an atmosphere of democratic exercises.

We expect plurality of readings in this democratic participation of the people. In this scenario, we need to subject our readings to a rigorous critique so that we will not be trapped into ideological manipulations. We may not be able to know all the consequences of our readings to our lives, so we leave open the space for communication and argumentation. In this way, we will never stagnate in our reading of the signs of the times. We continually reflect and critique our reading of the signs of the times to come up with the better reading of the signs of the times.

The hierarchical church (the clergy) needs to give up many things that it used to have and practice in the institutions. The clergy used to wield authority from above that imposes it to below. It is not used to dialogue and participation because authority revolves around itself and stagnates itself. This is what Pope Francis from Argentina meant by a “self-referential church” which is circular in movement, that is, it emanates from above and returns above. Thus, the institutional church remains a repetition of the same. We need to embody what Cardinal Tagle from the Philippines called a “humble church” that knows how to listen to and learn from below — from the ordinary people immersed in the world. Reading the signs of the times is a participative endeavour of the people of God in their search for truth in a democratic space of the (local) churches.