

Pope Francis Online



Year I (2013-2014)

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If necessary, use words (10-4-13)

On October 4 the Church celebrates the saintly legacy of Francis of Assisi. Soon after his election, Pope Francis told journalists at an [audience](#) that this saint came to mind when choosing his unique papal name. While the motivation in that inspiration was primarily the saint's concern for the poor, another Franciscan trait has come to the fore in this papacy. Pope Francis appears to the world as one who lives out the famous quip attributed to the saint (though its actual source is unknown): "preach the Gospel always and if necessary, use words."

Consider his [inaugural words from the balcony](#) of St. Peter's Basilica. After a simple and rather non-traditional greeting ("Good evening"), the new pope's speech comprised almost entirely words of prayer and blessing. Those words were not, as some surmised, a substitute for his not knowing what else to say upon such a momentous occasion. Nor were the formularies used there merely words of traditional ecclesiastical rites.



No, the pope's words were chosen purposefully. He prayed for his predecessor (an historical first). He called for prayer for one another and for the whole world. He asked for the crowd's prayer for him, and the more than 100,000 strong responded with a deafening silence, creating an atmosphere that transcended the moment and astonished the assembled media hordes.

Novel as this was, it should not surprise us. Prayer is the primary language of Francis – the saint and the new pontiff. Prayerful words have become central to Pope Francis' leadership of the Church on what he called its "journey" of charity, of fraternity, of trust. That is as it should be, for the Church is not merely a social or political or cultural institution. It is, first and foremost, a spiritual reality, for which its operating language is and must be liturgical. That Pope Francis' first act was to pray with the people of his new diocese and ask them to pray for him, was not only appropriate, but telling.

Other words included in that first address "to the city and the world" ("Urbi et Orbe") were perhaps less noteworthy but no less telling, because they offered an indication of the pope's point of view on what faces the Church operating in the world today. To those who, in the conclave preceding his election, saw an internal-external division of focus between the "operational management" of the Curia and the "evangelical outreach" of the Church, Pope Francis made clear the priority when he noted that his vicar "will assist me ... for the fruitful evangelization of this beautiful city."

Preaching the Gospel is the pope's primary job; doing will require many more words. Managing the minions who work under his authority represents a monumental challenge; shifting the Curia's "[Vatican-centric](#)" focus to an emphasis on the "community of God's people" is a daunting task. But that outreach remains the Church's mission, and the pope's chief concern. All else is secondary to this spiritual mission and is to be at the service of that evangelical preaching.

An approach that puts the spiritual first, that begins from words of prayer – that is how Pope Francis puts into practice the Franciscan dictum to preach always and use words when necessary. It's a personal method that yields "[A Big Heart Open to God.](#)" as he reveals at the conclusion of his famous interview. It's a mode of outreach that has jump-started this papacy, which continues to enjoy worldwide appeal. And it's a worthy approach for carrying out the New Evangelization, a task for all of us who work in and for the Church.

Featured image from [Reuters.com](#)

Joy to the World (12-6-13)

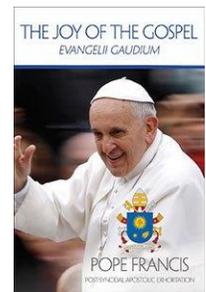
[Kathryn Jean Lopez](#) recently hit upon an essential truth underlying the world's continuing fascination with Pope Francis: "People see a man of joy. And they want something of it, they want to follow." A man of joy ... it's evident in almost every photograph! But his is not merely an optimistic demeanor. Nor is it a calculated display put on for strategic purposes.



No, what the world is witnessing is the real joy of a missionary disciple. His engaging, at times playful, interaction with people expresses a profound faith conviction, namely, that salvation has been wrought for us in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The appropriation of that truth is the source of his joy, and of the peace that characterizes this time of year. As he made clear in one of his (delightful) [daily homilies](#): "this joy is true peace," not something quietly stoic or tranquilly blasé; no, he says, "Christian peace is a joyful peace, because our Lord is joyful."

Real joy, which comes from experiencing the mercy of God, cannot ever be taken away, no matter what happens to us or around us. That's the joy people want and need. That's a contagious joy that draws record numbers of people to look upon and listen to this pope.

Joy is Pope Francis' message, one he shares endearingly in person and now enduringly in words. His first solo document – [Evangelii gaudium](#) – focuses on it, pleads for more of it, and exhorts us all to share it because "The joy of the Gospel fills the hearts and lives of all who encounter Jesus" (no 1.). Likened to another "[I Have a Dream](#)" speech, the papal text offers inspirational reading in this Christmas season, and [not just for Catholics](#). It discloses the key not only to the pope's personality, but also to the work of evangelization, a task heretofore impeded and still threatened by a lack of joy in the Church and in the world.



Whatever be the "[bold new vision](#)" of this pontificate, or the theological tensions inherent in the text, the core of Pope Francis' message, to the Church and through it to the world, can be encapsulated in one word: SMILE! But how many times, instead, have we encountered a religious educator, deacon, or priest with a "bad face"?! Serious need not mean somber; the latter look is hardly engaging. Formal does not mean dour; the latter sound can be downright depressing.

In his exhortation, the pope describes this all-too-common look and sound with characteristic wit: "There are Christians whose lives seem like Lent without Easter" (no. 6). "An evangelizer must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!" (no. 10.) From "the gray pragmatism of the daily life of the Church" comes a "tomb psychology" that "slowly transforms Christians into mummies in a museum" (no. 83). The lack of joy leads to a pessimistic attitude, which reveals itself in the look of "sourpusses" (no. 85).

Put simply, Church personnel who don't smile while they work will be hard-pressed to convey "good news." Without showing an appreciation for the beauty of the faith, they cannot "radiate light and communicate life" as they are called to do (no. 83). In the next post, we'll examine the pope's timely instruction on how all of us can have the joy we desire, and why it's essential to the message we believe and proclaim.

A Sermon in a Smile (12-13-13)



Yes, it's another Friday the 13th. The day/date conjures up an ominous image for those who entertain such superstitions. Yet even for realists times can be dark. This includes Christians as they confront the tensions and confess the sins of life in today's world.

Pope Francis is both a realist and a Christian! But his is not an ominous view of things. In fact, his recent exhortation on [“The Joy of the Gospel”](#) emphasizes just the opposite.

The realist in him acknowledges how “the hearts of many people are gripped by fear and desperation” such that their “joy of living frequently fades” (no. 52). He knows that the unhappiness of some who do the Lord's work leads to a stifling of the Church's joyful mission (no. 79). He confesses that even some can be paralyzed by acedia and view “the task of evangelization (as) a dangerous poison rather than a joyful response to God's love which summons us to mission and makes us fulfilled and productive” (no. 81).

Put simply, the temptation for all Christians these days is to look like “sourpusses” (no. 85). Sadly, that [lack of a smile](#) comes with and from preaching. Holding his tongue only slightly in cheek, the pope acknowledges that “both they (the faithful) and their ordained ministers suffer because of homilies: the laity from having to listen to them and the clergy from having to preach them!” (no. 135.)

Fortunately, the Christian in him recognizes the joy of the Gospel despite the tediousness of its proclaimers. Thus, he offers us a different vision. Though not a step-by-step guide, the papal exhortation indicates some key ingredients to a more joyful life ... and thus a more joyous proclamation.



Even when “God's voice is no longer heard, the quiet joy of his love is no longer felt, and the desire to do good fades” (no. 2), the Christian can know joy because of the gift of salvation. It begins on the inside, with an interior life of prayer that transcends personal interests and concerns. It proceeds by way of “grateful remembrance” (no. 13), first and foremost for that “great stream of joy” (no. 5) proclaimed in the Gospels, into which we can always enter. It also remembers and celebrates all those “throughout history who were filled with joy, unflinching courage and zeal in proclaiming the Gospel” (no. 263). In sum, the enduring Word of God – narrated in the biblical texts, lived in saintly lives, and mercifully experienced in the sacraments – remains a constant source of the joy all people want and need.

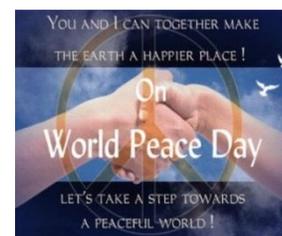
Perhaps this is why the pope dedicates such an extensive portion of his exhortation specifically to those who preach the Word (nos. 135-159). Without saying so explicitly, he tells them quite frankly and in pointed prose that they should give far greater priority to preparing and delivering their homilies. In terms of content, preachers should link what they say to real-life situations through images that appeal more to people's hearts than to their heads. In terms of form, homilies should be marked by simplicity, positivity, and brevity! Done well, a homily makes abundantly clear that the Lord, not the preacher, is the center of attention and that there is truly *Good News* to share.

If preachers would take to heart the papal exhortation, and lead listeners to realize that “With Christ joy is constantly born anew” (no. 1), perhaps then we will see more people in Church and more smiles on their faces ... no matter what the day and date.

Featured image from [hauntingreview.com](#)

Am I my brother's keeper online? (1-10-14)

In his first [message for the World Day of Peace](#), Pope Francis signals the anthropological foundation to what the world desires and desperately needs: “**Fraternity** is an essential human quality, for we are relational beings. A lively awareness of our relatedness helps us to look upon and to treat each person as a true sister or brother; without fraternity it is impossible to build a just society and a solid and lasting peace” (no. 1.)



The message roots this call to fraternity in the **family** as “the first pathway to peace” and in **faith** “since a fraternity devoid of reference to a common Father as its ultimate foundation is unable to endure.” It then addresses the search for peace amid troubling realities such as the economy, war, corruption, and nature.

But how does the papal plea play out in today's world of digital communications? Social media has already demonstrated a power to galvanize people in search of socio-political change (as in the [Arab Spring](#)). But in terms of everyday connections, am I really my brother's keeper online?

For the Holy Father, one of today's sad realities is “a profound *poverty of relationships*,” one that “can be overcome only through the rediscovery and valuing of *fraternal* relationships ... through the sharing of joys and sorrows, of the hardships and triumphs that are a part of human life” (no. 5).

Sharing life's moments – that's the stuff of social media! From status updates to check-ins to pictures of all kinds, people today capture life's moments on their personal timelines and Twitter feeds. They then make the news available to anyone who befriends or follows them. It's how we connect to others near and far.

These connections are no less real than the in-person ones. To claim that physical presence is more “true” than the digital one sets up a false dichotomy behind which too many people hide. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro points out: “This dimension of falsity, which we conveniently attribute to the web, in reality resides already in the falsity that is lived ordinarily in life and that, if anything, is amplified on the web thanks to the lack of physical contact. There is not a time for digital relations and a time for physical relations: there is life, which is one and is expressed in diverse modes.”

Though not the most interpersonal, the primary mode of communicating about life today is online. As result, the world of social media also calls for a fraternal approach as a new pathway to peace. Walking this path begins with ourselves and extends to the others we encounter online.

Regarding ourselves, authenticity is key. Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI describes this as “witness(ing) consistently, in one's own digital profile and in the way one communicates choices, preferences and judgements that are fully consistent with the Gospel, even when it is not spoken of specifically” ([Message for World Communications Day 2011](#)). The posts and pins and pokes all say something about ourselves!

Regarding what we say about others, fraternal charity should always be our norm. How often do we see (or make) comments that devolve into denigration? We may not be interested in someone's post. We may think their photos are silly. We may even disagree with their point of view. But if we remember that even online those users are our brothers and sisters, then peace may prevail.

Peter's stone is not rolling away (1-31-14)

If there is such a thing as a cover-pope, Francis certainly fits the bill. His image has graced the front of Life, Vanity Fair, and Time magazines, just to name a few. Now he's made it on the cover of Rolling Stone. [Dr. Hook](#) would be thrilled!

While a picture, by common adage, is worth a thousand words, the five words that accompany the pope's picture on the Rolling Stone cover – *the times they are a-changin'* – are worth little when it comes to accurately portraying the substance of the current pontiff. The times may be a-changin', but the implication that this pope will be changing the Church in ways hoped for by a secular world misses the mark by a long shot.



That Pope Francis has been a catalyst for changing the face of the Church and its culture of communication can hardly be denied. Almost a year into his papacy, he still enjoys the media's attention far beyond the typical grace period for world leaders. He's managed to capture such global appeal precisely because he preaches first and foremost the truth of God's mercy – a message that world with so little hop desperately longs to hear.

But that message, foundational as it is to the proclamation of the Gospel, does not mean that those doctrinal and moral teachings with which the majority may disagree are soon to be overhauled or discarded altogether. The times may be a-changin', but truth endures. As Fr. James Schall puts it, "Nothing the Pope says is ignored, except perhaps when he reaffirms that nothing basic in Christian teaching will or can be changed." Schall's [recent article](#) succinctly explains pop culture's confusion when it comes to what "change" means.



A pope on a magazine cover may be wildly popular, and it's certainly welcome attention in terms of publicity. As the veteran Vatican reporter, John Allen Jr., [jokingly quipped](#): "In every region of the world in which public opinion can be scientifically surveyed, Pope Francis has approval ratings that politicians or celebrities would sacrifice their children to pagan gods to attain."

The risk, however, is that such publicity will perpetuate the cultural myth that truth is something we determine rather than what we discover, or that the meaning of things is what a majority opines rather than what really is, irrespective of any individual or collective desire. The truths of the Church are not the pope's own, or any person's, to change with the times. Faith will always be a matter of divine revelation not social reconstruction.

To the first leader of the Church, Jesus said: "You are Peter, and upon this rock I will build my Church and the gates of Hades will not prevail against it" (Matthew 16:18). That's a stone that will not roll away, no matter how strong the popular tide. On this, Pope Francis, too, is quite clear.

Featured image from music.yahoo.com

Can journalists be “good Samaritans”?

(2-14-14)



Freedom of the press remains a pillar of the American experience. All citizens have the right to information. Communication about our shared interests and concerns unites a society, even when the content is subject to democratic debate.

Whether in print, on air, or online, journalists share the responsibility for fulfilling the daily communications that are essential to the life of a good society. In light of Pope Francis’ recent [message for World Communications Day](#), an interesting question to pose is whether journalists should also be Good Samaritans.

For the pope, that parable (in Luke 10:29-37) “is also a parable about communication” and teaches that “(t)hose who communicate, in effect, become neighbors.” But I suspect that the vast majority of readers and viewers do not consider their journalists in that light!

The “neighborliness” of which the Holy Father speaks is a plea to all communicators to foster “true encounters” through their work, “to be concerned with humanity” and to engage one another personally as a basis for being trustworthy.

For most journalists, this is likely not an easy task! They labor daily under the constraints of time, the limits of space, and the demands of business. Patient exploration is cut off by deadlines. Thorough explanation gives way to sound bites. Abbreviated headlines can be misleading. Special interests affect story placement. The breakneck speed and global reach of social communications are realities that color the journalist’s craft.

Yet, as Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli responded to one journalist’s question about the realism of the pope’s message, the frenetic spiral under which communications takes place today is all the more reason to take the papal message to heart. What one person writes or reports, another person reads or hears. At its basic level, then, communication creates an encounter. It establishes, and should reflect, a relationship.

That relationship is mediated in a variety of ways, depending on the communications medium. But at its root, the encounter between journalists and readers/listeners/viewers is about people more than subject matter. As the Holy Father puts it, “communication is ultimately a human rather than a technological achievement.” In the same vein, Pope Francis recently reminded [Italian television personnel](#) that “In the end, the ethical quality of communication is the result of conscientious – not superficial – attention, always respectful of people, both those who are the subject of information and the recipients of the message.”

Attentiveness to readers as “neighbors” – now there’s a worthy goal for editors and reporters, for producers and broadcasters. It may be a goal difficult for many to reach, given the biases evidenced by some secular media outlets. Still, it is possible. And given the esteem with which the world speaks of “good Samaritans,” it’s something worth striving to achieve. For Catholic journalists, especially, this would be a salutary resolution to make during [Catholic press month](#) (this February) and to keep throughout their careers.

Featured image from <http://ec.europa.eu/digital-agenda/en/european-journalism-study>

Francescomania! (3-7-14)



Almost a full year after the election of Pope Francis, the media mania continues. Most recently, His Holiness went viral (again!) for a phonetic foul-up in his pronunciation of an Italian word, which led to the eye-popping headline: [“Pope drops F-bomb during Vatican blessing.”](#)

Most reacted to this consonantal confusion with an “oops” or a laugh, a response that signals the now common, heart-warming welcome of the evident humanity of the pontiff. That humanity is born of his personal humility and expressed in his constant concern for poor (as in his [Message for Lent](#) this year). It naturally appeals to the public. It plays to the crowds. But it’s not a public relations strategy. The words of Pope Francis – even, or especially, the mistaken ones! – create a very realistic encounter.

The modern media eat this up and serve this atypical public image to the world. But the pope, himself, prefers to dismiss the hype and return the focus to its rightful place.

Just this week, on the day before Lent began, he granted yet another newspaper interview – an informal but not unimportant form of papal communication that has contributed to the new media perception of the pope and the Church. Published in [Corriere della Sera](#), it contains no great surprises; in fact, the very straightforward Q&A seems to lack the charm or depth of previous journalistic dialogues.

But there the pope makes clear his own perspective on Francescomania. In his response to the question about his public image, he said: “I like to be among the people, together with those who suffer, to go into the parishes. I don’t like the ideological interpretations, a certain mythology of Pope Francis. When it is said, for example, that he leaves the Vatican at night to go and give food to the homeless on Via Ottaviano. It never occurred to me (to do so). Sigmund Freud said, if I’m not mistaken, that in every ideology there is an aggression. To depict the Pope as a sort of superman, a type of star, seems offensive to me. The Pope is a man who laughs, cries, sleeps tranquilly and has friends, like everyone else. A normal person.”

A normal person? Yes and no! Yes, the normalcy of his likes and dislikes, of his gestures and words, of his everyday actions reveals a bishop at one with the flock he shepherds. But, no, this is not normally how the world perceives the Vicar of Christ and leader of the Roman Catholic Church.

Then again, perhaps now it can ... and should.

But, beyond the “coverpope” image generated by newspapers and magazines the world over, we would do well to view Pope Francis in light of Marshall McLuhan’s famous dictum: [“the medium is the message.”](#)

With Pope Francis, the medium is a living person, one who, [according to Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli](#), has a natural capacity to turn communications into an event. But the message he mediates and radiates, is not, ultimately, about him: “the real point of reference is not about Pope Francis but the love of God for human beings, the merciful, tender love of God for human beings.”

That’s the Good News of the Gospel that comes through in the pope’s words, even when they are mispronounced! It’s what Francescomania is really all about.