

Communications: A Gift for Humanity

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“Communication is a human rather than technological achievement.” This is the Pope’s starting point in analyzing the theme he propounds in his first Message for World Communications Day, which the Church celebrates this year on 1 June 2014.

Entitled *Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter*, the Message contains a number of topics very dear to Pope Francis, ranging from “the scandalous gap between the opulence of the wealthy and the utter destitution of the poor” to “the contrast between people living on the street and the brilliant lights of the store windows,” from “the many forms of exclusion, marginalization and poverty” to “conflicts born of a combination of economic, political, ideological, and, sadly, even religious motives.” In today’s world, the Pope says, “the media can help us feel closer to one another, creating a sense of the unity of the human family which can in turn inspire solidarity and serious efforts to ensure a more dignified life for all. Good communication helps us to grow closer, to know one another better, and ultimately, to grow in unity.... The Internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.” But the Holy Father also cites some of the problems linked to the new communications technologies, such as isolation from one’s neighbors as a result of the desire for digital connectivity, or the exclusion of those who lack access to social media. “These

drawbacks are real,” he affirms, “but they do not justify rejecting social media.”

Proximity in the Social Media. “What is it, then,” the Pope asks, “that helps us, in the digital environment, to grow in humanity and mutual understanding?” He answers his own question with the statement: “We need, for example, to recover a certain sense of deliberateness and calm...to be silent and to listen...and also to be patient if we want to understand those who are different from us.” These suggestions echo the plea of Benedict XVI in his WCD message on the theme of silence (2012) and on the promotion of a culture of respect, dialogue and friendship (2009). But “how can we be ‘neighborly’ in our use of the communications media and in the new environment created by digital technology?” Pope Francis finds the answer in the parable of the Good Samaritan, which, he says, “is also a parable about communication. Those who communicate, in effect, become neighbors. The Good Samaritan not only draws nearer to the man he finds half dead on the side of the road; he takes responsibility for him.... I like seeing this power of communication as ‘neighborliness.’”

The Internet and the Peripheries of Human Existence. “Nowadays,” the Pope continues, “there is a danger that certain media so condition our responses that we fail to see our real neighbor. It is not enough to be passersby on the digital highways, simply ‘connected’; connections need to grow into true

encounters.” For the Pope, “media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication” because “the impartiality of media is merely an appearance; only those who go out of themselves in their communication can become a true point of reference for others. Personal engagement is the basis of the trustworthiness of a communicator. Christian witness, thanks to the Internet, can thereby reach the peripheries of human existence.”

Here Pope Francis underscores once again his preference for “a bruised Church which goes out to the streets” rather than “a Church suffering from self-absorption.” And the “streets,” he explains, “are the world where people live and where they can be reached, both effectively and affectively.” One of these is “the digital highway—a street teeming with people who are often hurting.” Therefore, he says, “keeping the doors of our churches open also means keeping them open in the digital environment” because “in the area of communications too, we need a Church capable of bringing warmth and of stirring hearts.”

The Balm of Oil and Fine Wine. “Effective Christian witness is not about bombarding people with religious messages,” the Pope warns, “but about our willingness to be available to others.” This means “we have to be able to dialogue with the men and women of today, to understand their expectations,



doubts and hopes, and to bring them the Gospel.... We are challenged to be people of depth, attentive to what is happening around us and spiritually alert.” In view of this, he invites us to ensure that our communication is “a balm which relieves pain and a fine wine which gladdens hearts.” “Let us boldly become citizens of the digital world,” he urges. “The Church needs to be concerned for, and present in, the world of communication, in order to dialogue with people today and to help them encounter Christ. She needs to be a Church at the side of others, capable of accompanying everyone along the way.” In this context, concludes the Pope, “the revolution taking place in communications media and in information technologies represents a great and thrilling challenge; may we respond to that challenge with fresh energy and imagination as we seek to share with others the beauty of God,” always keeping in mind that “communication is a human rather than technological achievement.” ●