



WORLD COMMUNICATIONS DAY

8 MAY 2016

SUNDAY, 8 MAY 2016, FEAST OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

HOMILY NOTES

The 50th celebration of World Communications Day in 2016 will, as usual, coincide with the Solemnity of the Ascension of the Lord. It will be on Sunday 8th May in much of the world, although the Ascension will be celebrated in other places on Thursday 5th.

It is not surprising that, at the heart of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, the theme this year is Communications and Mercy: a Fruitful Encounter¹. Pope Francis published a letter on this theme on 24th January, now the customary date for the annual letter to be released. It is the feast of Saint Francis de Sales, an excellent preacher and communicator. Preaching is the main tool priests have for communicating with our culture, above all with the particular souls assigned to their care, so here are some thoughts that may just light the spark of an idea to help them as they prepare to celebrate the Ascension and World Communications Day. They may also support those priests who also commit time and wit to blogs, Twitter accounts and Facebook pages, to reach a wider audience or a different flock.

People who know the Roman Curia will be aware that the style of these annual messages is linked to the personalities of the officials in the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. Things may change there now that Bishop Paul Tighe has moved to the Pontifical Council for Culture. Conceptually, culture and communications are closely related, but the sands in Rome are shifting in ways that make predicting future developments there even more of an art than before!

Pope Francis calls Jesus Christ “the face of the Father’s mercy”², and the Church is a sort of prism through which the world perceives Jesus Christ. Despite her many imperfections and failings, she “is called to practise mercy as the distinctive trait of all that she is and does. What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God’s compassion, tenderness and forgiveness for all”³.

People who teach and are familiar with constructing curricula will understand the challenge of helping students make connections between different subjects; they will appreciate how helpful transverse themes can be. In a way, communications need not be taught as a separate topic if teachers are good communicators, because students will catch on, sooner or later, to the fact that the way their teachers talk and write about things is what makes the difference between an effective teacher and someone who is a real genius on a certain subject but cannot put it across. So runs the theory! Pope Francis is saying that mercy is one of those transverse themes. We should not need to talk a lot about it if the way we live our lives is a practical demonstration of what being merciful means. He thinks love is essentially communication, and is convinced that, if what we do and say is driven by love, “our communication will be touched by God’s own power”⁴.



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It is rare to hear Catholics speaking in and to our culture in a way that shows they really think God's power is behind them: surely Pope Francis is challenging us to be much more confident. There is no need to be aggressive, but it seems foolish to miss opportunities to help people see what makes us tick, i.e. which values mean something to us. Did you notice how polite Mick Jagger was in reply to Pope Francis' request to reconsider staging the Rolling Stones concert in Cuba on Good Friday? As a current British television advertisement keeps reminding us, "if you don't ask you won't get". St. Peter puts it this way: "Always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope, but do it with gentleness and reverence"⁵. Honouring the person or people with whom you are dealing must be the key: "in each of these 'little ones', Christ himself is present.... Let us not forget the words of Saint John of the Cross: 'as we prepare to leave this life, we will be judged on the basis of love' [Words of Light and Love 57]"⁶.

The Pope's message speaks of building bridges, enriching society by bringing people together and convincing them they 'count', of healing wounded memories and peacemaking. These are the fruit, he says, of carefully crafted communication. He contrasts this with "vicious circles of condemnation and vengeance" which can ensnare us and ferment hatred. There is a clear warning not to react to such negativity in an equally negative way, which could "rupture relationships and communication"⁷. Shakespeare's brilliant description of the quality of mercy in *The Merchant of Venice*⁸ comes to his help in the fourth paragraph, a quotation he values precisely because it shows mercy as a blessing not only to the one to whom mercy is shown but also, and especially, to the person who finds he or she can be merciful rather than exact revenge. He thinks it is particularly important for politicians, those who mould public opinion, and the Church's own leaders, to recognise what a powerful tool they have in forms of communication permeated with the belief that mercy makes a difference: "It is easy to yield to the temptation to exploit... situations to stoke the flames of mistrust, fear and hatred, Instead, courage is needed to guide people towards processes of reconciliation"⁹.

Key enemies of mercy in the way the representatives of Christ think and speak are all those forms of expression that indicate superiority, pride, disdain, cold or harsh judgment. The denunciation of individuals has no place in a merciful heart, although moral guidance must point out "the evil and injustice of certain ways of acting, for the sake of setting victims free and raising up those who have fallen". What Pope Francis encourages us to avoid are harsh, moralistic tones, simply because they will not welcome the sinner home but "risk further alienating those whom we wish to lead to conversion and freedom, reinforcing their sense of rejection and defensiveness"¹⁰. This can be a difficult area to address, particularly for people committed to public campaigns where individual politicians are singled out for their parliamentary voting record on bioethical issues. The old adage suggesting we must "hate the sin but love the sinner" seems particularly apt.

Pope Francis is ready for the suggestion that living by mercy "is hopelessly idealistic or excessively indulgent". His answer will not easily convince people who have not had a happy family life, because he speaks of families as places of unconditional love, places where we are always



welcome. People who have experienced unconditional love from their parents will cheer loudly, but there are many who will not recognise such a description of parenting. For them family life has been a place of contradiction, fear and even physical or psychological abuse. Perhaps this paragraph needs to be used with care, or given the respect of a smile without a comment.

Listening and closeness are the terms the Pope asks us to ponder towards the end of his message. While hearing is about receiving information, listening is about closeness and commitment to getting things right rather than being silent onlookers, watching life happen. Listening takes other people seriously by letting them trust us enough to share with us what worries them, what makes them happy or sad, and that can happen only when people feel we are not trying to dominate or control a relationship. Once again it is about honouring and respecting the person or people with whom we are dealing. As the French philosopher Lévinas - who seems to be lurking behind the way the Pope writes here - said, the person in front of us is, in a way, a manifestation of the divine, of holiness, almost like the burning bush: dialogue seen in this way is 'holy ground'.

A different sort of closeness comes in the digital world, where we need to act with the same respect as we owe the person we meet face to face. So many people have felt demeaned, dishonoured, almost destroyed by the way others have used digital media against them. But the power to educate, to encourage and to support people through digital media shows that it is a good thing. There is a lot to think about in the Pope's concluding sentence. "In a broken, fragmented and polarised world, to communicate with mercy means to help create a healthy, free and fraternal closeness between the children of God and all our brothers and sisters in the one human family"¹¹.

1 Communication and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter, Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 50th World Communications Day, 24th January 2016

[henceforth referred to as C & M]

2 *Misericordiae Vultus*, Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, 11th April 2015, 1 [= MV]

3 C & M paragraph 1

4 C & M 1

5 1 Peter 3, 15f.

6 MV 15

7 All this is in the third paragraph of C & M

8 Act IV, scene i: "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath. It is twice blessed: it blesseth him that gives and him that takes".

9 C & M paragraph 5

10 C & M paragraph 6

11 C & M concluding paragraph