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Pope to media: 'For God's sake, slow down!'

John L. Allen Jr. | Jan. 23, 2014 The Francis Chronicles
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In a message Thursday addressed to the world of communications, Pope Francis called on the media, including the digital world of social media, to foster two qualities for which they're not exactly renowned: patience, and openness to ideas that challenge one's prejudices.

In a divided world, the pope said in a text released Thursday, the media ought to close gaps and bring people together. Yet amid the frenzy of instant deadlines, and in a fragmented media market in which outlets often cater to the biases of niche audiences, the pope seemed to suggest that's not always the case.

Francis called on the media, both established institutions and protagonists of the new social media, to exercise greater "deliberateness and calm," in part so they have time to be "genuinely attentive in listening to others."

"We need to be patient if we want to understand people who are different from us," Francis said. "People only express themselves when they are not merely tolerated, but know that they are truly accepted."

The pope also adverted to the realities of an ever-expanding galaxy of media outlets in which it's increasingly easy for people to draw their news and commentary only from sources that reflect their own views.

In that light, he called on media consumers not to "barricade themselves behind sources of information which only confirm their own wishes and ideas, or political and economic interests."

In fleshing out his vision of a more human form of communications, Francis offered a couple of trademark uses of pastoral imagery.

It's not enough to be "passerby on the digital highways," he said, invoking an image from the biblical parallel of the Good Samaritan.

Communication intended to manipulate or to promote consumption, the pope said, is a form "violent aggression" akin to that suffered by the man in the Gospel parable.

Later, he said that digital networks is made up "not of wires, but of people."

While Francis urged Catholics to see the media as a missionary territory, an arena to communicate Christian values such as "the nature of marriage and the family" and "the proper distinction between the religious and political spheres," he also clearly cautioned against bombastic proselytism.

"Effective Christian witness is not about bombarding people with religious messages," he said, but rather reaching out to people in a spirit of dialogue.

"To dialogue means to believe that the 'other' has something worthwhile to say," the pope said.

"Engaging in dialogue does not mean renouncing our own ideas and traditions," Francis said, "but the idea that they alone are valid or absolute."

Two days after Francis admonished the titans of the earth gathered in Davos, Switzerland, about the dangers of "widespread social exclusion," he returned to the theme in Thursday's message in describing the realities of the world in which the media operates.

"We see a scandalous gap between the opulence of the wealthy and the utter destitution of the poor," the pope wrote of today's global scene.

"Often we need only walk the streets of a city to see the contrast between people living on the street and the brilliant lights of the store windows," he said.

The pope's comments came in an annual message for the church's World Day of Communications. The formal title of the message is "Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter," one of the signature phrases of Francis' papacy.

The pope's message, his first for a World Communications Day, was presented Thursday in a Vatican news conference by Italian Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, who was joined by an Italian academic specialized in communications named Chiara Giaccardi.

Celli called the message a "profoundly Franciscan" document, full of "themes especially dear to him."

In response to a question about whether Francis' invitation to the media to slow down was actually realistic, Celli said in the teeth of "an ever more frenetic spiral" today, a growing number of people may actually feel a "nostalgia for silence."

On this point, he said, the pope isn't just a "Don Quixote fighting against the wind."

Celli also suggested that Francis' brief message extends points he made originally in a speech to the bishops of Latin America during his Brazil trip in July and his apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium,* released in November.

For her part, Giaccardi argued there's a "small Copernican revolution" in Francis' message, which is redefining the nature of communications not as "the transmission of content" but rather "the reduction of distance."

One footnote: Both Celli and Giaccardi exhibited some of the spirit of the pope's message by setting aside their prepared texts to speak off the cuff, a departure from the normal Vatican practice of having officials read lengthy prepared statements and leaving relatively little time for questions.

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