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'Cold call' pope strikes again

by John L. Allen Jr.

The Francis Chronicles

Rome — Pope Francis may have made headlines Thursday for his thoughts on social media, but it continues to be his use of the telephone that's probably the signature communications touch of this papacy.

Francis has emerged as the "cold-call pope," given his penchant for phoning up ordinary people out of the blue, sometimes because they've written him with a story or a problem, sometimes because he's read about them or heard of them and wanted to be in touch.

It's become such a regular occurrence, in fact, that Italian humor columnist Beppe Severgnini wrote a piece in August offering tips on etiquette for when somebody gets a call from the pope. (Example: "Don't be afraid to be normal ... If Francis wanted to be bored, he would have called a government minister.")

While a few of these calls become public knowledge after the fact, the vast majority remain off the record, known only to the pope and his conversation partner.

One more was added to the record Friday, as the Italian paper *Corriere della Sera* reported that Francis called an Italian woman named Filomena Claps on Monday evening, reaching her at her husband's bedside in a hospital in the city of Potenza.

After the by-now familiar opening act -- "This is Pope Francis"; "Sure it is, who is this really?"; "No really, it's the pope ..." -- Francis explained that he was calling in response to a letter Claps had sent a month earlier, imploring the pope to help her get to the bottom of what happened to her daughter, Elisa, in September 1993.

The story of Elisa Claps is among the well-known *gialli*, or mysteries, of contemporary Italian life. She disappeared in September 1993 at the age of 16, and her body was eventually discovered in the attic of a

Potenza church in 2010. A local young man, who in the meantime had been convicted of another murder, was also charged with killing Claps and sentenced to life in prison.

The Claps family, however, has always suspected there's more to the story. They believe Catholic officials knew Elisa's body was in the church long before they reported it, suggesting that perhaps the local pastor, who's since died, was somehow involved in her disappearance. They've demanded clarification from the bishop but have never been satisfied with the responses.

In his phone call, Francis told Filomena Claps that he would say a Mass for her daughter the next day, which would have been her birthday.

According to Filomena, the pope also invited her to visit him in Rome and promised that "light will be shed" on what church officials knew, and when they knew it, about what happened to her daughter.

Francis was apparently unaware that her husband, Antonio, was gravely ill, and promised to say a Mass for him too. As it turned out, Antonio died two days later.

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According to Filomena, she told the pope: "Thank you, Holiness, because you're restoring our faith in the church we used to believe in, and you're helping us reconcile with it."

"But," she said she added, "we still want the truth."

(Follow John Allen on Twitter: @JohnLAllenJr)

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