Year III (2015-2016)

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published at

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Francis, the adjective (3-13-15)

Today the world (and not just the Church) celebrates the second anniversary of the election of Pope Francis. Expect to see numerous stories, analyses, and commentaries about the septuagenarian sensation. Professional and amateur Vaticanistas will opine about visions and inspirations, as well as priorities and policies, all in the hope of figuring out and/or further advancing the popularity of this pope, which PEW research shows to be near an all-time high in the USA.

But there may be no clearer indication of the pope’s prominence in the world than this linguistic sign: his name has become an adjective! Grammarians may rightly denounce the use of a noun as an adjective, but these days “Francis” comes to describe multiple phenomena.

The Francis Church is envisioned as a metaphorical field hospital, where mercy accompanies a sick and suffering world before any doctrine provides a judgmental diagnosis.

This caring vision plays out as The Francis Factor in numerous ways. It characterizes the novelty of this papacy, as first-year anniversary events in the Church and the academy highlighted. It offers a title to digital ponderings about media and ministry. It even suggests a political influence on economic policy.

The novel factor poses the question of The Francis Effect in the form of news stories and media documentaries. Sociological studies point to a statistical shift in church attendance, at least in Italy if not clearly in the USA. Economic analysis makes of the pope a case study in corporate turnaround.

The effect leads, in turn, to The Francis Challenge, especially in matters related to the public square. British ambassador Nigel Baker recently elaborated on the political, economic, and moral aspects of the papal challenge in terms, respectively, of guaranteeing peace, tackling poverty, and protecting the planet. What challenge the pope will lay before the U.S. Congress this September is still to be seen.

Meeting that challenge may require divine help, and therein lies The Francis Miracle. In his new book by that name, John Allen, Jr, suggests that the pope is out to transform the church and the world, and that this is “a mission with a miracle at its core.” For Allen, the reforming zeal of this papal mission has a threefold thrust: centrism of thought, outward orientation of activity, and goodness of governance.

“Francis” – once a proper noun that evoked remembrance of the saint from Assisi and the call to a poor and humble and simple life for individuals and for the Church. Having been adopted for the first time ever as a papal name, “Francis” now signals so much more in the minds and hearts of people around the world.

Whatever the part of speech, “Francis” is giving our religious lexicon and our faith life a new meaning.
In last week’s post, I highlighted a new book by John Allen, Jr. called The Francis Miracle. In the 2015 John Cardinal Foley Lecture and in an article about the book, Allen explains that the title refers to a dramatic change of style and personality from Cardinal Bergoglio to Pope Francis. He quotes the Holy Father as saying this came from “an experience of the closeness of God that gave me a great sense of interior freedom and peace … and that sense has never left me.”

The journalist calls this transformation a miracle. St. Paul called it experiencing the “freedom of the children of God” (Rom 8:21).

The pope’s detachment is quite evident in his lifestyle, from the simplicity of his accommodations to the photogenic little black bag with which he travels. It also appears in his actions, as when he freely speaks his mind (without the vetted text) or comes and goes as he pleases (without cautious regard for his own safety). And this free-spirited pope has garnered widespread popular appreciation, as shown by his 90% favorable rating in the U.S.

Appearances aside, the real nature of spiritual freedom is a matter of the heart. St. Francis de Sales describes it as “the detachment of a Christian heart from all things so that it is free to follow the known will of God” (Letters of Spiritual Direction, p. 138). He offers three telling characteristics of “the Francis miracle.”

First, the spiritually free person “is not attached to consolations, but accepts affliction with as much docility as nature can manage.” He may no longer have the chance to wander into town for pizza, as he wishes he could in his most recent interview, but Pope Francis is okay with that. He added, “it has been hard work to change. But you get used to it.”

Second, the free-spirited Christian doesn’t get upset about not fulfilling spiritual exercises when some other call to charity intervenes. Obviously a pope has to keep a schedule (planned by staff), but Francis is known to waver from it for the sake of others. Sometimes he arrives late to an audience, because he was busy chatting with another group. Often he stops in the midst of his travels to embrace a child or an elderly admirer. And once in a while, he just shows up somewhere, unplanned and unexpected, but always to the delight of those with whom he meets.

Third, spiritual freedom “hardly ever loses (its) joy, for no deprivation can sadden a person whose heart is attached to nothing.” The pope’s constant smile, as well as his frequently playful interactions, have become routine. His joy seems boundless.

Pope Francis discloses the characteristic liberty of a child of God, in the biblical sense. His effect on the world has been to put this spiritual joy of heart on display, a joy that he ceaselessly exhorts us all to have and to share. Perhaps our continuing fascination with him suggests that this is the real freedom for which human beings long.
Polls, Pews, and the Catholic Pulse
(3-27-15)

Has Pope Francis quickened the pulse of the Church? His name has been associated with new directions, but has he made any real difference?

The latest PEW research, conducted in February on a national scale, points to high favorability rating (90%) among a broad-based sample. But it did not address whether popularity has led more people to Church.

A comparable survey, conducted in March among Catholics in the Lehigh Valley (PA), reported a similar level of favorability (83%). It also shows approval of the “direction that (he) is trying to take the Church” (84% somewhat or strongly), as well as a 30% increase in “excitement” about the Catholic faith. Still, only 9% of respondents said their attendance at Mass has increased over the past year.

Now the Religion News Service reports a “significant bounce” in the percentage of Catholics who claim the strength of their religious affiliation has increased since the election of Pope Francis. Coupled with a steadying of the retention rate for Catholicism, the news suggests that the Francis Effect could be real.

Having participated in the Lehigh Valley report, and a live web chat about it, I admit the news is not all that staggering! In fact, no one questioned any of the results or their implications. But the lack of hoopla need not suggest indifference or a lack of impact on the Catholic pulse. Rather, it points to a fundamental difference between cultural perspectives coming from poll results and the living faith of people in the pews.

On the one hand, polls are tricky measuring rods precisely because of their language. Vagueness gives wide latitude, but latitude loses preciseness.

What does “welcome” mean when asked if the Church should be more of that in terms of gays and lesbians or those divorced and remarried? If it wishes that these persons not be excluded from the congregation, the Church has always believed that, notwithstanding personal perspectives or errant practices. If, instead, it suggests accepting the lifestyle as not being in conflict with the teaching of the faith, well that’s an entirely different story. And just what does a “favorable rating” mean anyway? Is that akin to being “liked” on Facebook, or does it portend some level of positive engagement or actual agreement with the substance of the faith? And in just what “direction” is Pope Francis trying to take the Church?

Polls point to trends and/or interests. They cannot reveal the truth of things. Polls serve a good purpose in measuring where people are and what they think at a given point in time. But thought demands more. It requires a sufficient clarity about the subject matter (i.e., understanding the question) as well as an adequate foundation for giving an answer (i.e., knowing the faith). [For a live look at this, join us for “Faith & Spirits” at the Allentown Brew Works on April 13.]

The polls DO reveal two things of note. The first is our culture’s influence on people’s perspectives. The desire to be more welcoming is now commonplace; thus, support for more tolerance is to be expected. But what does that really entail? The second is that the Church must do a better job (as is always the case) in teaching what the faith really means – not in superficial surveys but in the splendor of the truth it proclaims.

featured image from www.mcall.com
The Cross of the Lord (4-3-15)

In the Heart of Every Father is a collection of meditations and reflections by Jorge Mario Bergoglio. The editor of the Italian edition (Fr. Antonio Spadaro, S.J.) explains that, at the root of Pope Francis’ spirituality, “spiritual/evangelical discernment sees not only black and white, but processes, progresses, gradualness, shades; it looks to recognize the presence of the Spirit in human and cultural realities, the seed of his presence already planted in events, sensibilities, desires, profound tensions of hearts, and social, cultural and spiritual contexts.”

Below is an excerpt from one of the pope’s meditations on the Spiritual Exercises entitled “The Cross of the Lord.”

The mystery of the cross is rooted here: only those understand it who “are weak,” the “little ones,” those who renounce any other hermeneutic of life and know that it is necessary (as Scripture says) to let “the dead bury their dead.” It is a difficult wisdom, this one of weakness and of littleness, by which to understand the cross! Saint Ignatius (of Loyola) proposes to us to make it ours in an aggressive manner. It would do us well to read slowly his invitation and to grasp that our greatest honor in following Christ is founded on “being deemed and esteemed crazy (without, however, giving any occasion of it).”

(To quote St. Ignatius):

“Similarly, it necessary to underline vigorously to those who come to be examined, by giving evidence of the value and evaluating the importance before God our Lord, of what way it benefits and is profitable in the spiritual life to abhor entirely, and not (just) in part, all that the world loves and embraces, and to accept and desire with all possible strength all that Christ our Lord has loved and embraced. Just as worldly people, who follow the world, love and seek with all diligence the honors, fame and great recognition of their own value on earth, being conformed to the teachings of the world, so they who walk on the way of the spirit and who concretely follow Christ our Lord, love and desire intensely the contrary, that is, to dress themselves in the same divided clothing of their Lord, out of the love and reverence they owe him. In this way, if there were not any offense regarding his divine majesty, if it were not imputed to others as sin, they would desire to undergo injury, false witnesses, affronts, and be deemed and esteemed crazy (without, however, giving any occasion of it), moved by the desire to resemble and to imitate in any measure our Creator and Lord Jesus Christ, by dressing themselves in his divided clothes, precisely because He has clothed himself for our great spiritual profit and with this has given us an example, so that in all things possible to us, with his grace, we seek to imitate him and to follow him, because He is the way that leads people to life.”

The Ignatian invitation to take up the cross in all (our) days stands in this quest for poverty contrary to wealth, of humiliation contrary to vanity, and of humility contrary to haughtiness.
Witnessing to more than oneself (4-24-15)

One part of me doesn’t want to write this – lest the phenomenon receive more undue attention. Another part of me wants to write in loud letters – in the hope of shifting the social media focus.

More and more, it seems, social communications are not so much social as self-centered. By now, the ―selfie‖ is ubiquitous; its cousin, the ―usie‖ is growing in popularity. One could call it artistic biography, not unlike the self-portraits of Rembrandt. But Facebook faces are far from art; they may be well-meaning, but the multiplicity of goofy looks posted in endless streams paints nothing more than a picture of vacuous narcissism.

Now the phenomenon has entered the video realm. The new website called YouNow allows people to set up a live camera feed so others can watch constantly what someone is doing – as if the world really needs to know that someone is #sleepingsoundly or #cruisingaroundtown. The ongoing commentary by watchers merely accentuates the exploitive nature (and danger) of such Internet voyeurism.

There’s a serious side to this, as well. Today’s ‗quantrepreneurs‘ give us multiple ways to analyze data from daily life in search of the Quantified Self. What began as a digital quest for self-knowledge through numbers is morphing into ‗nudging technology‘ that can tell us when to drink more water, eat more slowly, or sit up straighter. With the increasing demand that ‗consumers cede their free will to machine algorithms,‘ personal informatics can now prod us toward a supposedly better life.

How radically different is the notion of Christian witness. The communications that accompanies this Easter season is marked not by self-promotion but by testimony about someone else – the Risen One. What informs the life of faith is not data-driven analysis of one’s own behavior, but the Spirit-driven mystery of what God has done for us in the Resurrection.

The extraordinary experience by which those first disciples were touched has been handed on to us. Our identity as Christians and our mission as Church, as Pope Francis recently explained, is to bear witness to this life-changing event. We do so by the way we see, remember, and tell the story of this sacred event.

―The witness is one who … has seen a reality, but not with an indifferent eye; he has seen and has let himself become involved by the event. For this reason he remembers, not only because he knows how to reconstruct with precision that facts that happened, but also because those facts have spoken to him and have touched him in a profound sense. ‘Then the witness tells, not in a cold and detached way, but as one who has let himself be put in question, and from that day has changed his life.‘

Easter invites us to shift our focus from showing ourselves to witnessing to God now, who remains living and present in our midst.

(featured image by Kayana Szymczak, www.nytimes.com)
The most influential “tweep” (5-1-15)

He’s at the top once again! As Cindy Wooden of Catholic News Service puts it, “when Pope Francis tweets, the world listens.”

In the annual analysis of “Twiplomacy” undertaken by a Swiss public relations and communications firm (Burson Marsteller), Pope Francis emerges as the global personality with the “most influential” Twitter account – “more than eight times higher than (President) Obama’s.” That determination puts the Pope at the top of the world’s list for the third year in a row. His more than 19.5 million followers would be delighted.

But this is far more than a numbers game or a popularity poll. The pope’s growing influence in the Twittersphere points to the ascendancy of this form of social communications as a critically important modality of the Church’s engagement with the world. As Fr. Antonio Spadaro suggests in Twitter Theology, the pope’s daily digital message offers a necessary and beneficial “twitness”!

It’s necessary because that’s where and how people communicate. Twitter may not have the depth of interpersonal contacts, but it makes connections between and provides information about people and groups. As such, tweeting does facilitate intercommunion and sociality. And as Karl Rahner once said, anything that does that is, in some way, an actuation of the Church.

It’s beneficial, because it fosters newfound creativity in communications. Since the messages must be condensed, honing in on what is essential becomes paramount. Effective preaching, whether online or from the pulpit, has to get to the point and touch straight to the heart. And just because tweets are brief, it doesn’t mean the message is superficial. The one sentence transmitted to the pope’s followers each day clearly inspires deeper consideration; that’s precisely why his good and holy thoughts are shared (re-tweeted) with so many others around the world.

Fr. Spadaro is right: “In a world in which information passes by way of sharing, and not only access but also the production and sharing of contents are open doors to all, it is no longer possible to have a merely passive attitude.” Fortunate for many, the pope’s role in all this is quite active … and the world is listening more and more each day.
Stone Age Wisdom for the Digital Era
(6-12-15)

Is the pope a Luddite? Some might think so given recent headlines like “Pope tells parents not to let children use computers in their bedrooms.”

But headlines too often distort the message. To understand what this pope says, context counts and syntax matters. The pope issued no magisterial directive on how to organize households. What he offered was common-sense wisdom.

In more off-the-cuff remarks during the journey to Sarajevo, Pope Francis spoke both to young people and to journalists about computer usage.

Prefacing his remarks to the youth with self-deprecating humility (“Obviously, I am from the Stone Age, I’m ancient!”), his remains sound today: “If you live glued to the computer and become a slave to the computer, you lose your freedom. And if you look for obscene programs on the computer, you lose your dignity.” But he also implored those digital natives to “Watch television, use the computer, but for beautiful reasons, for great things, things which help us to grow.”

To the reporter who inquired about what was meant by wasting time with television and computers, the pope distinguished between the medium and its content. Regarding the former he makes clear that the risk comes not from the digital medium but from one’s attachment to it. Slavery of this, or any kind, is what “damages the soul and takes away freedom.” About the latter the pope was not telling parents how to act as much as he was describing what some concerned parents do, given their legitimate fears about a child’s access to inappropriate (even dangerous) content.

Undoubtedly, computers can have a deleterious effect. Ease of access to personally damaging content like pornography is frightening. So, too, is the strength of social media to affect brain power, with research now showing that digital distractions lead students to be able to concentrate on a task for only 31 seconds!

But computers are not the problem. Fantasies are. Removing the device does not restrict the imagination. Nor does banning the technology eliminate distraction.

With regard to the digital era, parents need to be teachers, properly supervising and forming the young, and students need to learn, as they always have, what to embrace and what to avoid. To do otherwise, by ignoring the risks of technology or by reverting to a less technological learning environment, is to deny the environmental reality of the age in which we live.

Social media can make moral development a challenge, but we cannot abdicate the perennial task of education in human freedom. Hence, the pope’s Stone Age wisdom in this regard is worth emphasizing: “In an age of images we must do what was done in the age of books: choose what is good for me!”

featured image cropped from huffingtonpost.co.uk
Drawing the line on technology (6-19-15)

Commentary on Pope Francis’ new encyclical (published yesterday) is currently underway. Appreciation of it will take more time. For now let me add but one thought, on just one paragraph.

First, the context. Chapter one paints a picture of “what is happening to our common home.” Its fourth part delineates the “decline in the quality of human life and the breakdown of society.” In the last paragraph there (no. 47), the pope writes:

Furthermore, when media and the digital world become omnipresent, their influence can stop people from learning how to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously. In this context, the great sages of the past run the risk of going unheard amidst the noise and distractions of an information overload. Efforts need to be made to help these media become sources of new cultural progress for humanity and not a threat to our deepest riches. True wisdom, as the fruit of self-examination, dialogue and generous encounter between persons, is not acquired by a mere accumulation of data which eventually leads to overload and confusion, a sort of mental pollution. Real relationships with others, with all the challenges they entail, now tend to be replaced by a type of internet communication which enables us to choose or eliminate relationships at whim, thus giving rise to a new type of contrived emotion which has more to do with devices and displays than with other people and with nature. Today’s media do enable us to communicate and to share our knowledge and affections. Yet at times they also shield us from direct contact with the pain, the fears and the joys of others and the complexity of their personal experiences. For this reason, we should be concerned that, alongside the exciting possibilities offered by these media, a deep and melancholic dissatisfaction with interpersonal relations, or a harmful sense of isolation, can also arise.

Far from a Luddite-like lament, or some magisterial malediction on the means of social communication, this analysis explains well the “care for our common home” that is the concern of the entire text. In this case, caring offers both caution and hope.

In today’s home, digital technology IS omni-present. Even without using it, digital media affects virtually every aspect of our lives. More than simply a tool, digital technology has become the “connective tissue” of our environment and functions now as the “nervous system of our culture” (Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli).

The critiques leveled by the pope are all true! As with other technologies, this one, too, can generate pollution, and it does so with alarming speed and global reach.

Still, the focus here, as throughout the encyclical, is not on a socio-political issue or techno-scientific debate. The pope’s chief concern is about human harmony – with God, with nature, and with one another – in this “home” that we call the world. In that digital abode, we need to learn (and to teach) the “true wisdom,” the “real relationships,” and the shared “knowledge and affection” of which he writes.

Realizing these timeless and universal values will not come from banning modern technology or seeking sanctuary from it. We don’t appreciate the value of freedom by the absence of temptation. And yearning for the days of pre-digital communications is nothing but nostalgia.

Learning to care for the beauty of our common digital home requires conversion (what good do we seek there?) and commitment (to the truth of the persons who communicate). Then will technology serve its ultimately spiritual purpose of assisting human beings “to live wisely, to think deeply and to love generously.”

featured image cropped from www.news.va
Francis doublespeak (1-22-16)

We await the text of the pope’s annual Message for World Communications Day, which is usually published on January 24, the memorial of St. Francis de Sales (1567-1622), Bishop and Doctor of the Church, and patron saint of journalists.

The theme for the 2016 World Communications Day had previously been announced as *Communication and Mercy – A Fruitful Encounter*. According to the accompanying press release, “The Theme highlights the capacity of good communication to open up a space for dialogue, mutual understanding and reconciliation, thereby allowing fruitful human encounters to flourish. At a time when our attention is often drawn to the polarized and judgmental nature of much commentary on the social networks, the theme invokes the power of words and gestures to overcome misunderstandings, to heal memories and to build peace and harmony.”

Pope Francis expounds upon this power in his new book-length interview entitled *The Name of God Is Mercy*. Released earlier this month, the book offers *several insights* into what is clearly the pope’s central theme. While reports have referenced some key quotes in the book (“God forgives not with a decree but with a caress”) and important clarifications from the pope (e.g., on “who am I to judge?), two excerpts referring to St. Francis de Sales are worth a closer look. In these are revealed the sentiment and the system of mercy that Pope Francis seeks to capture in this Jubilee Year.

The sentiment (p. 70) he offers in response to a question about the risk of letting oneself be contaminated by adherence to the law. “Saint Francis spoke of ‘our dear imperfections,’ saying, ‘God hates faults because they are faults. On the other hand, however, in a certain sense he loves faults, since they give him an opportunity to show his mercy and us an opportunity to remain humble and to understand and to sympathize with our neighbors’ faults’.”

The system (pp. 13-14) he draws from a homily by Cardinal Albino Luciani (Pope John Paul I) that makes reference to a merciful priest (Fr. Leopold Mandic) who inspires Francis: “as Saint Francis de Sales said, ‘if you have a little donkey and along the road it falls onto the cobblestones, what should you do? You certainly don’t go there with a stick to beat it, poor little thing, it’s already unfortunate enough. You must take it by the halter and say: Up, let’s take to the road again. … Now we will get back on the road, and we will pay more attention next time’.”

Two Francis’s speaking as one … and the message couldn’t be clearer!

*featured image courtesy of Herbert Winklehner, OSFS*
A New Logic for Mercy (1-29-16)

We may suppose mercy to be soft, giving a veritable “pass” on misdeeds. We may think mercy to be indulgent, forgoing a right regard for justice.

In his Message for the 50th World Day of Communications, Pope Francis acknowledges those assumptions, yet he speaks of something more, a new communications logic that, if we open our minds and hearts to considering, might just change the way we speak and act.

This year’s message highlights the modalities by which we think rather than the means of social communication (limited to just one paragraph). The reason, Antonio Spadaro points out, is that whatever the means we use, “communication is ‘credible’ not only if it corresponds objectively to what is true but if it is ‘trustworthy’.”

Highlighting this interpersonal dimension, Pope Francis underscores the link between communication and mercy and proposes a new logic that can bring about a “fruitful encounter” between the two. Four such changes of mind are summarized below, for each of which the pope paints an image to consider.

(1) Mercy is universal, not intramural. “As sons and daughters of God,” says Pope Francis, “we are called to communicate with everyone, without exception.” Mercy is not a gift receivable only by those who participate in Church life. It is the attitude the Church must bring to the world. “What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God’s compassion, tenderness, and forgiveness for all” (emphasis added). The image, for Francis, is one of the hearth, where “warmth is what gives substance to the word of faith; by our preaching and witness, it ignites the ‘spark’ which gives them life.”

(2) Mercy is about communion more than exclusion. For Christians, we who know we are sinners redeemed by God, encountering others entails encouragement, where “even in those cases where they must firmly condemn evil, they should never try to rupture relationships and communication.” The image, for Francis, is one of building bridges, an effort to forge relationships that can lead to peace, rather than ensnaring others (and ourselves) in “the vicious circles of condemnation and vengeance.”

(3) Mercy comes from a position of equality rather than superiority. Especially true for ministers of the Church is the need to avoid “harsh and moralistic words” that only “risk alienating those whom we wish to lead to conversion and freedom (by) reinforcing their sense of rejection and defensiveness.” While it’s true, and reaffirmed here, that “We can and must judge situations of sin,” that does not mean that we should judge individual persons “since only God can see into the depths of their hearts.” Putting forth the image of a family home, “where the door is always open and where everyone feels welcome,” the pope calls on us to speak the truth, while imploping us to do so always in love.

(4) Mercy recognizes dignity, even in anonymity. In the digital world, “It is not technology which determines whether or not communication is authentic, but rather the human heart and our capacity to use wisely the means at our disposal.” Those means have revolutionized social communications. But in the realm of social networks, where people are profiles and likes are mere buttons, where interactions are generally one-directional and relationships are a-synchronous, it’s easy to forget that an actual person is on the other end of whatever we post and share. Recalling the image of a digital “public square,” Pope Francis reminds us that “Access to digital networks entails a responsibility for our neighbor whom we do not see but who is nonetheless real and has a dignity which must be respected.”

Real people, equal in dignity, with whom we are interrelated, in a humanity that is universal – this is the realm of our everyday encounters, where mercy can change the world if we learn to think and speak in new ways.
Faithful Trolls? (2-5-16)

The screaming headlines draw attention: “Pope Francis opens a can of whoop a** on hateful internet trolls – and it’s beautiful.” But popes really aren’t prone to such pugnaciousness.

In fact, the image contradicts the very point that Pope Francis is making in his Message for World Communications Day 2016. Yes, he wishes that communications be free from suggesting “a prideful and triumphant superiority” and from “(h)arsh and moralistic words” that demean others. But trolls are not the troublesome ones he has in mind; the paragraph in which we read those words refers to pastors of the Church!

Trolls are typically more overt in their meanness. Identified in Psychology Today as “Narcissists, Psychopaths and Sadists,” trolls “will lie, exaggerate and offend to get a response.” A less blatant, but more insidious problem with online communications comes in the form of personal disagreement disguised as authentic judgment.

This we see on self-proclaimed “Catholic” websites that regularly disrupt the very unity that the C-word denotes. Aghast at the impromptu expressiveness of Pope Francis, or distraught by the challenging vision of Catholicism that he preaches, some think that they, more so than the pope, speak for what we really (should) believe.

We might easily dismiss the ludicrous notion that the faithful “step into the breach” caused by “semi-heretical Church leaders.” But what about less boisterous protestations that nevertheless purport to create Francis-free zones, particularly in seminaries, rectories, or parishes?

In his Cardinal Foley Lecture on Social Communications, Fr. Thomas Rosica spoke of this sad phenomenon. The English-language Assistant in the Holy See Press Office called for a new “field hospital” to bring healing to “the wild, crazy world of the blogosphere.” Why? Because “On the Internet there is no accountability, no code of ethics, and no responsibility for one’s words and actions. It can be an international weapon of mass destruction, crossing time zones, borders and space. In its wake is character assassination, destruction of reputation, calumny, libel, slander and defamation.” He challenged the assembled audience, including many seminarians, by asking: “To what degree are our blogs and websites really the expression of the wealth of the Christian patrimony and successful in transmitting the Good News that the Lord has asked us to spread?”

That patrimony finds new expression in the words and actions of Pope Francis. Much of the world shows interest in what he has to say; many others recoil at his remarks. But acceptance of papal primacy is not a prerequisite to being moved by his message of mercy. Believers don’t have to like a pope, as Randall Smith explains! And to those feeling dismay, he notes, “A Catholic who is disappointed with the pope is a disappointed Catholic.”

The Church has now entered into the Jubilee Year of Mercy proclaimed by Pope Francis. Living as well in the digital realm, we find this a favorable time to ask ourselves how we can communicate that quintessential dimension of the Gospel via social communications. We might start by looking at the logic by which we communicate mercy. Then, perhaps, when we do go online, we might share more merciful tweets, posts and comments … so that virtue can confound the trolls.
Airborne Works of Mercy (2-19-16)

Once again, Pope Francis has given the media plenty of fodder for the spinning news cycle. From comments on board his flight back to Rome came headlines about his calling-out The Donald on what being Christian entails and opening the door to birth control to combat the Zika virus.

Now that the reports have hit the virtual airwaves, it’s time to look at what the pope actually said. Even more so, how he said what he said shows what it means to speak with mercy. From that in-flight press conference, we hear the spiritual works of mercy in action.

(1) To “instruct the ignorant” – The pope did not approve abortion or contraception as legitimate responses to a medical crisis. Understanding morality requires making proper distinctions. See Mary Rezac’s “pointers” for a good clarification.

(2) To “counsel the doubtful” – Some still wonder whether the pope will change Church teaching about receiving sacraments. His answer: “Integrating in the Church [couples who have divorced and re-married] does not mean receiving communion … we cannot say ‘from here on they can have communion’.”

(3) To “admonish sinners” – The Holy Father has no qualms about helping all of us see when we are blind in our own concerns. To do so isn’t “disgraceful” (as The Donald thinks); it’s didactic. “A person who thinks only of building walls … and not of building bridges is not Christian.” The admonishment concerns having one (“only”) without the other. But Christian concern is not primarily about policies (necessary as they are). It’s about people – fellow human beings to whom the Gospel (think: Good Samaritan) challenges us to offer hope and help along the way.

(4) To “bear wrongs patiently” – Unflagging in the face of never-ending questions about the Church’s response to situations of abuse or mismanagement, the pope expressed justifiable ire (at the “monstrous” situations) and reiterated the number of efforts he has undertaken to rectify the wrongs. What more can he say?

(5) To “forgive offenses willingly” – Despite the reporter’s confusion of cases (a murderer who repents is not in the same situation as someone divorced and remarried), the Holy Father rightly expressed the merciful desire to “integrate” all members in the life of the Church, including “wounded families” and especially children, who are the “primary victims” of those wounds. Forgiveness is an attitude born of willingness. Integration is a path trod with much diligence.

(6) To “comfort the afflicted” – Everyone wants to meet the Pope! The logistics make that impossible. Still, to the reporter who wondered aloud why he didn’t meet with some groups, the pope offered the comfort of his shared anguish, while pointing to the “encounter” that can be had by hearing/reading what he said to all.

(7) To “pray for the living and the dead” – Gently reminding the inquisitive reporter of the truth that “things a son says to his mamma are a bit private,” the pope nevertheless revealed something of what he prayed for in his quiet time with the famed Virgin Mary of Guadalupe: for the world, for peace, for pardon, for the health of the Church, for the Mexican people, and for fidelity among religious vocations. And as has become his signature, he asked the journalists to pray for him.

Though they come to us without tone of voice or facial expression, Pope Francis’s words are worth reading on their own. Underlying them is not only his openness to dialogue with purveyors of public opinion, but his deep desire for merciful communications. On board and on the ground, Pope Francis demonstrates how mercy works by way of honesty expressed always in charity.
Inspiragram (3-25-16)

There’s no such app – yet! – but the growing trend has taken another leap forward.

Last week, Pope Francis joined Instagram. The papal account -- @Franciscus -- shattered records by amassing a million followers within just twelve hours. Add this to the 27 million followers on his Twitter accounts, and this pope is easily the world’s most-recognized social media phenomenon.

Why on earth would a pope bother to immerse himself (and by extension the Catholic Church) in the passing fancies of the “selfie” generation?

Some denounce this move as a yet another sign of this pope’s banality and the attenuation of the Church’s message at risk of loss amid “the clutter of hashtags and modern self-obsession.” But such short-sighted obsession with criticizing Pope Francis’s revolutionary normalcy misses the media mark and fails to grasp the inspirational power of the Gospel proclamation.

In terms of the means, Fr. Antonio Spadaro explains quite cogently the pastoral logic at work in making use of this particular social medium. On Instagram, the pope is able to enter into a communications dynamic that generates a participative encounter with a vast majority of people, young and old. “This does not diminish (the pope’s) authoritativeness at all, but the closeness it creates, on the contrary, increases it.”

In terms of the message, @Franciscus enters into the unending tradition of using imagery as “epiphany” — a creative expression of the attractive beauty of the Gospel message. As St. John Paul II said of the work of artists, “beauty will save the world.” Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI echoes this by noting how the combination of faith and creativity “leads to a direct encounter with the daily reality of our lives, liberating it from darkness, transfiguring it, making it radiant and beautiful.”

The sacred Triduum celebrates the profound theological depths and ultimate personal impact of the salvation wrought for us by the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Now and always it is the Good News for human life.

That Gospel makes its impact in and through the deeds by which God enacts our Redemption. And that impact is experienced in successive generations through the “images” that invade our being and inspire us to appreciate what God has done for us. The revelatory power of beauty – in art, in architecture, in photographs, in the imaginative mind – is what ultimately inspires us to believe.

Pope Francis knows this. He communicates this through social media. Millions of people can now “see” the message on multiple platforms. When they participate in these holy encounters, and “share” that with others, the Gospel is proclaimed to all the world. That inspiring proclamation, facilitated now by the social media through which people regularly communicate, fulfills what the Church has always been called to do.

images from news.va and instagram.com
Amoris Laetitia – an “ideal” teaching (4-15-16)

Having finally read the entire document, I think it’s fair to say that Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation is about the “ideal” of marriage. But the implications of that vary widely, from the lamenting critique that the pope has failed to uphold the ideal, to the giddy supposition that since no one can achieve an ideal the pope has equalized all marital situations.

As usual, extreme views fail to be accurate!

That marriage is an “ideal” expression of human love is clear from the pope’s repeated use of the word, which appears 21 times in the text. But “ideal” does not mean for him that marriage should be “idealized” (no. 36). The ideal of covenantal marriage is also real and, with grace, realizable and realistic. With pedagogical prowess, Pope Francis defines this ideal, posits the elements of it, describes the character of it, and analyzes the process of it – all the while also presenting a contrast so as to bring its meaning into focus.

Referenced throughout the document, “this ideal” is defined in no. 292: “Christian marriage, as a reflection of the union between Christ and his Church, is fully realized in the union between a man and a woman who give themselves to each other in a free, faithful and exclusive love, who belong to each other until death and are open to the transmission of life, and are consecrated by the sacrament, which grants them the grace to become a domestic church and a leaven of new life for society.” Examples of relationships that are “not the ideal which the Gospel proposes” are acknowledged in no. 298.

Building up to the definition, Pope Francis notes that the ideal of marriage involves exclusivity and stability (no. 34), mutual assistance (no. 36), growing old together (no. 39), and “a love that never gives up” (no. 119). It does not include the flaunting or imposing of “something other than what the Church teaches” (no. 297).

The pope describes the character of this ideal love as “demanding” (no. 38), “high” (no. 200), “beautiful” (no. 230), and “evangelical” (no. 308). But he also notes that the ideal is not stereotypical; it is embodied in, and gives shape to, a mosaic of married lives (no. 57).

Pope Francis rightly reminds us that to achieve this ideal takes intentional effort, “integrating (moments of intense enjoyment) with other moments of generous commitment, patient hope, inevitable weariness and struggle” (no. 148). Couples faithful to the ideal know this to be quite true! Those preparing for marriage need to realize this is what awaits them.

That marriage is a lesson learned in the living of it gives pastoral forces to the pope’s teaching. Consenting and committing to the ideal of marriage is the necessary beginning. Realizing that is a dynamic process, one which the couple moves toward, together, in a continuous way “until death do us part.” Recognizing this dynamism, the pope acknowledges that some couples have not fully realized the ideal. But that is not to say that the ideal is impossible or that it need not be sought. Quite to the contrary: “A lukewarm attitude, any kind of relativism, or an undue reticence in proposing that ideal, would be a lack of fidelity to the Gospel and also of love on the part of the Church for young people themselves” (no. 307).

In calling for pastoral mercy for those who have not or are not living the ideal of marriage, Pope Francis actually does uphold the ideal. It’s that which spouses are called to achieve. It’s that which so many couples do live – and in doing so they teach the world the richness of what love can be. It’s that against which the realities of not yet fully realizing it appear so painful. And about those latter situations (those “not yet fully realized” rather than “irregular”), the Holy Father challenges us all to be more merciful … and thereby share that ultimate ideal of love for our neighbor that is our Christian calling.

featured images from usccb.org and wordonfire.org
The 50th World Communications Day takes place this year on Sunday, May 8th. This is the only “world day” called for by the Second Vatican Council and is celebrated in most countries on the Sunday before Pentecost.

Each year a theme is announced on the Feast of the Archangels, Michael, Raphael and Gabriel (September 29), the patrons of radio workers. A message from the Holy Father is then published on the Memorial of St. Francis de Sales (January 24), patron of journalists. This year, during the Jubilee, the theme/message is “Communications and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter.”

The bishops of the USA have never designated World Communications Day for formal celebration. The movable date makes it a challenge to schedule amid ordinations, graduations, First Communions, and all the other happenings at this time of year.

But we plan to change that … at least locally!

To mark this golden jubilee, Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary, in the Archdiocese of Philadelphia, is inaugurating an annual symposium named for its esteemed alumnus and former president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications – JOHN CARDINAL FOLEY. The Cardinal Foley Symposium takes place at the Seminary on Thursday, May 26.

The symposium begins with a public forum on the day’s theme. The guest panelists who will offer distinctive perspectives on the message include Monsignor J. Brian Bransfield (the General Secretary of the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops), Dr. Angela Corbo (Associate Professor of Communications at Widener University), and Mr. Matthew Schiller (President of the Catholic Press Association).

The symposium concludes with a luncheon celebration, during which the Seminary will present the first Cardinal Foley Award in Communications to a media professional who excels in the field. (Contact Cathy Peacock at the Seminary to reserve your tickets for the luncheon.) The inaugural winner of the Cardinal Foley Award is longtime Philly favorite PAT CIARROCCHI, who recently retired from CBS-3 after more than thirty years in television and radio broadcasting. Among the many stories she covered, Pat shared with Philadelphiaans live reports from the canonization of Philadelphia native St. Katherine Drexel in 2000, the funeral of Pope John Paul II in 2005, the historic resignation of Pope Benedict XVI in 2013, and most recently the World Meeting of Families and visit of Pope Francis last September.

As Pope Francis proclaims in his message this year, “What we say and how we say it, our every word and gesture, ought to express God’s compassion, tenderness and forgiveness for all. … If our hearts and actions are inspired by charity, by divine love, then our communication will be touched by God’s own power.”

In today’s digital world of communications, the hashtag yields a new power. It may not be a divine sign, but our new Cardinal Foley Symposium plans to make the most of it!
Parents beware … and be wary! (5-20-16)

Last week’s blog considered anxiety as an affliction of the young. This week’s looks to desperation as a potential downfall for the old, at least those who are parents.

Screenagers is a new documentary about growing up in the digital age. In this film, a mom who is also a physician “probes into the vulnerable corners of family life, including her own, to explore struggles over social media, video games, academics and internet addiction.” The film “reveals how tech time impacts kids’ development and offers solutions on how adults can empower kids to best navigate the digital world and find balance.”

The foundational fact to the film is that young people spend at least 6½ hours each day looking at screens. Related factors also contribute to the problem of parenting. Psychologically, young people feel like they can do more by multitasking, despite the fact that the outcomes are worse than with single-focused attention. Socially, the young are obsessed with how they look, and social networking is all too easy a place to post photos that are no one else’s business. And educationally, what kid doesn’t prefer gaming to math?!

The medium may be contemporary, but the challenge is not new. It’s called growing up! Maturity is a progressive development of realizing the importance of the choices we make, of learning what we should attend to amid the many options we face, of valuing what is truly important even when it’s not immediately satisfying.

Are parents’ jobs made more difficult because of supposedly “smart” phones? Undoubtedly, yes. But all is not lost. Adolescents share in that resiliency that is characteristic of all human life.

Of course, I have no experiential basis on which to stand when it comes to parenting (except as a recipient of good parental teaching)! Nevertheless, I dare to offer three considerations beyond those made in the documentary – one that’s timeless and two drawn from Pope Francis’s ode “towards a better education of children” that is chapter seven of his exhortation On Love in the Family.

First, and the classic fallback, is the need to teach by example. How often do adults model that mistaken multitasking? How casually do they attend to their own phones while dising the company of others in their immediate presence?

Second is to wonder where the teenagers are. Says the pope: “Parents need to consider what they want their children to be exposed to, and this necessarily means being concerned about who is providing their entertainment, who is entering their rooms through television and electronic devices, and with whom they are spending their free time” (no. 260).

Third is to ask what teenagers are learning. According to the Holy Father, the family is the place where the young can “learn to be critical about certain messages sent by the various media” (no. 274).

But someone has to show them, someone has to search for them, someone has to teach them … PARENTS!

We’re praying for you. We (and they) are counting on you.