

Pope Francis and the Promotion of the Human Person in Mass Media

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Since his election to the papacy on March 13, 2013, Pope Francis has enchanted Catholics and non-Catholics alike. A year and a half after the clouds of white smoke ascended from Vatican City, the Pope continues to occupy international media attention. From the cover of *Rolling Stone* magazine to a wildly successful Twitter account, there is no sign of the pontiff disappearing from the world media stage. However, unlike other media sensations, the Pope does not garner attention for violent offseason antics, nor for provocative MTV dances. Rather, the successor of Peter utilizes the vast array of mass media platforms to promote the dignity and beauty of human life. The variety of media outlets are for the current Pope like an assortment of roads all leading toward the existential outskirts, where the poor and vulnerable can be served. The same good shepherd has made clear that he expects his flock to follow him in using well the power of social communications. This article is a brief reflection upon how the new Pope's words and actions challenge all men of good will to employ mass media for the promotion of the human person.

The use of mass media in the writings of Pope Francis

Only days after taking the chair of Peter, Pope Francis convoked the gathering of a wide range of journalists in the Vatican's Paul VI Audience Hall, where he expressed gratitude for the noble vocation of those in-

involved in mass media. Reflecting on the attention his election had received from the international media community, the pontiff shared the following reflection:

«The role of the mass media has expanded immensely in these years, so much so that they are an essential means of informing the world about the events of contemporary history. I would like, then, to thank you in a special way for the professional coverage which you provided during these days – you really worked, didn't you? – when the eyes of the whole world, and not just those of Catholics, were turned to the Eternal City and particularly to this place which has as its heart the tomb of Saint Peter»¹.

With a wry smile, he thanked the many tired media experts who had no doubt lost sleep to transmit the historic anticipation and excitement that permeated Rome in the month following Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI's historic resignation. Pope Francis did not, however, restrict his words to the enthusiasm of the present moment. Rather, he took advantage of the gathering with various members of the media community to highlight their fundamental calling. He stated that «it should be apparent that all of us are called not to communicate ourselves, but this existential triad made up of truth, beauty and goodness»². He thus remained his listeners that their work in mass media superseded the mere quest of sensationalism or ratings generation. The Latin American pontiff thus challenged the crowd to embrace their work as a lofty mission akin to that of an artist or philosopher. He invited the journalists to

aid their fellow man to not simply satisfy a fleeting curiosity about superficial events, but rather to communicate something of what is most noble in man. Shortly after his brief allusion to the metaphysical transcendentals, the Pope shared the simple and personal encounter with a friend that inspired the choice of a name that reflects his untiring commitment to the dignity of even the most vulnerable. Pope Francis warmly recounts the fraternal exchange as follows: «Cardinal Claudio Hummes: a good friend, a good friend! When things were looking dangerous, he encouraged me. And when the votes

reached two thirds, there was the usual applause, because the Pope had been elected. And he gave me a hug and a kiss, and said: “Don’t forget the poor!” And those words came to me: the poor, the poor. Then, right away, thinking of the poor, I thought of Francis of Assisi»³.

It remains deeply impressed in the mind of the Argentinian pontiff that his election to head the world’s largest religion did not mark the conquest of personal power in a position of superiority. Instead, his new role initiated the opportunity to serve better the weakest and most vulnerable members of the world community, both within and without his flock. Thus, from his first moments on the world stage, the new Pope has used his extensive media presence to champion the dignity of all human persons. His encounter with the various members of social communications made clear that he does not expect to labor alone in the mission to employ media boldly for the good of man.

Months after the initial fascination with the newly-elected pontiff settled, Pope Francis continued to offer a profound mass media humanism. In a September 2013 gathering with the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, the Holy Father spoke of the role the various forms of media have «to enter into dialogue with the men and women of today, to know how to engage this dialogue in order

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to appreciate their desires, their doubts and their hopes»⁴. There is no talk of the media as a mere escape from reality. Rather, media is meant to be a means for fostering the authentic dialogue needed to appreciate the dignity of our fellowmen. In particular, the newer forms of social media are marked for the interactive nature and thus provide for

an ongoing exchange that nurtures are ever more profound appreciation for the gift of the other. Authentic communication never implies the mere interaction of two pieces of technology. Instead, communication is achieved when the human beings

behind such pieces of technology find the means to express their deepest thoughts and concerns. The various forms of media often enable human beings to bridge the gap of large distances to share such aspirations in an exchange of mutual enrichment. Authentic communication avoids all forms of manipulation so as to instead promote the appreciation of the various gifts of each partner of dialogue.

The Pope further developed his insights on the humanistic value of mass media in his message for the 48th World Communications Day. He begins his brief reflection praising the fact that the rapid development of social media has often made it easier for us to feel ourselves neighbors of one another. Radio, television, film and the internet give us unprecedented access to events around the world, therefore allowing us to realize the common dreams, hopes, disappointments and sufferings that unite the human family across racial, political or creedal divisions. Nonetheless, the Pope warns that, despite great technological advances, our times are not without darker signs of inhumanity. As the Argentina pontiff poignantly observes, «on the global level we see a scandalous gap between the opulence of the wealthy and the utter destitution of the poor. 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»⁵. Thus, within the first paragraph of his meditation on the meaning of social communication, the Pope of the poor centers his thoughts on dignity of the vulnerable and marginalized members of society.

As he develops his meditation, the Holy Father is quick to refer to the specific benefits of the internet in stimulating a “culture of encounter” through the various opportunities it offers for ongoing interaction between diverse individuals. Throughout his reflection, the pontiff repeatedly encourages his readers to boldly enter the digital world so as to overcome barriers of prejudice that could divide otherwise distant persons. For all of his confident promotion of the new forms of social communication, he is nonetheless unambiguous in affirming the subordination of any given medium to the good of the person. He cautions that without a proper formation in the use of the exciting new modes of new media, «the desire for digital connectivity can have the effect of isolating us from our neighbors, from those closest to us»⁶. This danger by no means negates the truth that, when wisely utilized, the new media «offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity»⁷. Among the many virtues needed to engage properly in world of media, the Pope highlighted a calm deliberateness and patience. The former virtue allows one to shift through, judge and prudently act upon the overwhelming stream of information the mass media provides. The latter virtue, on the other hand, allows one to accept the other in such a way so as to allow each partner in dialogue to express himself sincerely.

The use of mass media in the gestures of Pope Francis

In the three short papal writings discussed above, the Pope lays out a beautiful vision of the humanistic role of mass media. A number of unforgettable gestures exemplify the Holy Father’s capacity to practice that which he preaches regarding the media. In what follows, I would like to cite a few instances of

how the Pope’s use of mass media has left an example for Catholics and non-Catholics alike in their use of the means of social communication in the promotion of the human person.

One of the most famous images from the months following Pope’s Francis’ election is that of the pontiff washing the feet of young convicts in Rome’s *Casal del Marmo* youth prison during his Holy Thursday Mass. The Pope chose to perform the traditional ceremony among youth whose lives seem to hold little hope. His simple, but tender embrace of the various prisoners made its way to most major newspapers and televisions around the world and throughout cyberspace, thus loudly proclaiming that no life is beyond redemption. A simple ceremony that would have touched a small group in Rome became a powerful message to millions of people across the globe, thanks to the astute use of mass media.

The Pope’s rounds through St. Peter’s Square have also provided numerous, heartwarming gestures of humanity for the world to admire. Among these various encounters, three in particular highlight the capacity of mass media to project images that promote the dignity of the human person. On Easter Day of 2013, the perceptive pontiff noticed a young boy with cerebral palsy. The Pope warmly embraced Dominic Gondreau in a gesture that recalled that no person, no matter how debilitated by illness, is without value. The act also renewed the strength of Dominic’s family, who faced the daily struggle of caring for their beloved relative. The transmission of the event on various news stations, therefore assuring that this same message of hope and encouragement would reach other families struggling to attend to ill beloved. At the end of October of the same year, the Pope presided over a gathering of families in St. Peter’s Square, only to find himself with an unexpected young companion. When a small boy insisting on remaining on stage during the papal discourse, the pontiff smiled, patiently patted the child and continued his address unfazed. This simple encounter, once again communicated to the

world via mass media, countered any mentality that would reduce children to mere inconveniences who hassle adults as they pursue their work. The Pope's welcoming attitude demonstrated the value of each new life and innocent joy that they can irradiate. A month later, while visiting with the crowd after his Wednesday audience, the Pope took time to embrace Vinicio Riva, whose condition of neurofibromatosis has disfigured almost his entire body with tumors. The 52-year-old man reports that many fellow citizens routinely mocked or avoided him in the streets of Italy. In contrast, he recounts having experienced only welcoming affection from the Pope who embraced and kissed him without hesitation or fear for his personal health. Thanks to the mass media, the simple gesture was captured and transmitted internationally so as to bring consolation to those who face struggles similar to Riva. Once again, Pope Francis left an enduring testament to the power mass media has in promoting the dignity of all men.

This brief article is evidently unable to express the full force of the various acts of humanity noted above. The television networks and news agencies around the world were able to communicate vividly images that the written words of a scholarly article fail to convey. The Pope is not content using but a single method of promoting the dignity of human person. Rather, he employs the vast array of mass media to reach the widest audience in the most diverse of manners. As the Holy Father continues to captivate the attention of the mass media, his words and gestures remain a challenge to all men of good will. Numerous secular outlets, unafraid to criticize harshly the Church that Francis leads, find little to object to when broadcasting the Pope's advancement of the sick, suffering and forgotten. Although many onlookers may not be able to share all of his doctrinal convictions, few can reject his unswerving defense of and care for the

most vulnerable and excluded members of society. Pope Francis, in continuity with his predecessors, has thus emerged through his words and example as a leader in the promotion of the human person through the array of mass media. While all too many stars fill headlines with their fits of self-indulgence, Pope Francis remains a media darling who constantly turns attention toward the plight and needs of others.

The use of mass media in addressing controversial bioethical issues

Not long after Pope Francis assumed office, some onlookers took note of his scarcity of words regarding a number of controversial bioethical issues, particularly abortion. Shortly after praising the Pope for his loving embrace of a member of his diocese, Dominic Gondreau, Rhode Island Bishop Thomas Tobin reflected on the Pope's attention to the unborn during his first six months in Rome. The

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bishop expressed his concern: «I'm a little bit disappointed in Pope Francis that he hasn't, at least that I'm aware of, said much about unborn children, about abortion, and many people have noticed that. I think it would be very helpful if Pope Francis would address more directly the evil of abortion and to encourage those who are involved in the pro-life movement. It's one thing for him to reach out and embrace and kiss little children and infants as he has on many occasions. It strikes me that it would also be wonderful if in a spiritual way he would reach out and embrace and kiss unborn children»⁸.

While Tobin spent much of his interview praising the accomplishments of the new Pope, he was afraid that the dignity of one group of vulnerable human beings was being ignored. Indeed, Tobin's concerns seemed to be confirmed a few weeks later when the Pope appeared to encourage his flock

to speak out less against abortion in his famous interview with the Italian periodical *La Civiltà Cattolica* (translated into English and published in the US magazine *America*). In particular, the following papal response from the interview, sparked considerable controversy around the world:

«We cannot insist only on issues related to abortion, gay marriage and the use of contraceptive methods. This is not possible. I have not spoken much about these things, and I was reprimanded for that. But when we speak about these issues, we have to talk about them in a context»⁹.

Various major news agencies boasted headlines regarding the Pope's condemnation of the Church's obsession with opposing abortion and left in confusion many who had dedicated time and energy to fighting abortion as an offense against human dignity. However, it has become increasingly clear in the words and gestures of the Pope that the unborn are included in those worthy of defense and promotion in the mass media. After examining some of his writings and actions, we will reflect briefly on his efforts to present traditional moral reflection in a tone that avoids legalism or self-righteousness.

One day after the release of his famous September 2013 interview with *Civiltà Cattolica*, the Pope made some of his most frank objections to the horrors of abortion in an address to gynecologists in Rome. The Pope insisted that doctors must show human beings respect «from the first instant of conception»¹⁰. In his bold proclamation against what he calls a “culture of waste” insensitive to the weakest members of society, the pontiff clearly affirmed that «the first right of the human person is his life. He has other goods and some are more precious, but this one is fundamental - the condition of all the others»¹¹ Whether intentional or not, many saw the timing of such direct comments against the destruction of unborn life as a counter to any misinterpretation of the Pope's interview as a departure from viewing abortion as anything less than an affront to the dignity of the unborn person. Likewise, in his apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaud-*

ium, a sort of blueprint for his papacy, the pontiff wrote as follows: «Among the vulnerable for whom the Church wishes to care with particular love and concern are unborn children, the most defenseless and innocent among us»¹². Pope Francis evidently does not consider the protection of the unborn as an antiquated issue to be ignored in the face of preoccupations for other issues of social justice. Instead, he extols the promotion of all human beings of all states and conditions of life from the moment of their conception until their natural death. In April of this year, the pontiff shared poignant words with the South African bishops, in which he noted that «abortion compounds the grief of many women who now carry with them deep physical and spiritual wounds after succumbing to the pressures of a secular culture»¹³. The Pope has repeatedly petitioned a greater role for women in the Church and in society, but spurns any specious progressivism that would present as liberating that which in fact injures a woman's quest for the realization of her feminine genius. Thus, he is clear that abortion is not only contrary to the dignity of the unborn, but also to the women many misguidedly seek to affirm in their support for legalized abortion. In his recent visit to Korea, the Holy Father articulated more with his actions than with his words when he devoted time to pray at a cemetery commemorating those who lost their lives due to abortion. While offering no discourse on the theme, the act was a clear affirmation of the value of even those who lived briefly in this world.

Having analyzed the Pope's firm rejection of abortion as an attack on the dignity of unborn human life, we will now examine the meaning of his controversial interview comments and the significance they have for those struggling to promote human life through mass media. The controversial remarks reflect the pontiff's urgent desire for all men of good will to enter biomedical debates with a respect for those who disagree with them and the right disposition to endeavor upon a common journey toward an ever greater appreciation for the truth. Some

producers of mass media, prone as they are to offer easily digestible sound-bites, obscure the complexity of a bioethical issue and thus hinder the possibility for constructive dialogue. Speaking of the media uproar generated by the papal interview from both ends of the US political spectrum, bioethics professor Joseph Tham offers the following balanced observations:

«Unfortunately, such nuanced responses are often lost in the media, and by advocates on both sides of the abortion debate. While the Catholic position against abortion is common knowledge, less known is the Church's intellectual tradition to seek truth not as something already possessed, but as a

journey. This is not relativism, rather, it is an openness to dialogue and a belief in the existence of truth that is accessible by reason»¹⁴. Dialogue is not possible if certain positions are wrenched from their context and insistently asserted without rational. Such moralism creates a sterile antagonism that brings neither side closer to the promotion of the human person. Each side should instead seek to identify in each other those common values that can serve as the foundation for further consensus.

The Pope, in short, does not want the wealth of his intellectual tradition reduced to a set of slogans or harsh condemnations. If the Church's opposition to abortion is not presented within a context of her rich bioethical reflection, then such a position risks becoming a mere political ideology that simply alienates all intellectual opponents with each insistent repetition. He is encouraging a bioethical presentation that affirms, inspires and attracts rather than one that merely opposes, condemns and rejects. The Holy Father does not want the joy and beauty of bioethical truth abridged in a nagging list of moral prohibitions. Moreover, he is well aware that certain terms or manners of presenting certain issues will provoke negative connotations and prompt many listeners to end dia-

logue. In reflecting upon the new tone the current Pope wants to give mass media portrayals of bioethical topics such as abortion, *LifeSiteNews* editor John-Henry Westen notes that the pontiff's approach «includes blunt, but unconventional and unsettling language; avoidance of hot-button terms, but not the concepts; frequent mention of the devil or a spiritual approach; use of powerful gestures; and frequent reference of mercy and compassion»¹⁵. He knows that

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in the case of abortion and other bioethical issues, the pressures of an anti-life culture and certain challenging situations make it difficult for individuals to act in accord with sound moral principles. He is thus highly sensitive to the need that those who have engaged in objective moral evils have for forgiveness, mercy and a new opportunity. He therefore encourages others to follow his lead in using mass media to engage in bioethical discussion of abortion and other controversial topics not as ideological enemies, but as weak and wounded fellow human beings on a common journey toward more fully embracing truth and practicing goodness in all of its inexhaustible beauty.

Conclusion

In his brief reign as the successor of Peter, Pope Francis has consistently positioned used his unique mass media influence to champion the value of all men, no matter their color, creed, health or socio-economic status. His concise addresses to those involved in social communication offer an orientation to all men of good will in following the pontiff's media humanism. Moreover, his simple embraces of the sick, suffering and forgotten members of society have inspired an international audience of Catholics and non-Catholics thanks to their mass media broadcast. Despite his unquestionable concern for the poor and marginalized, the-

re were initial concerns that the Holy Father was neglecting the protection of the unborn in his engagement with the mass media. We have seen, however, that the Pope has taken multiple occasions to speak and to show the importance of promoting the dignity of the unborn and resisting the horror of abortion. At the same time, we have seen his desire to present such controversial issues as abortion within the richness of the Church's bioethical thinking. He seeks compassionate dialogue with all men of good will rather than harsh denunciations. While Pope Francis continues to enjoy a host of Twitter followers, frequent television appearances, a myriad of newspaper headlines, and even the occasional graffiti portrayal as a superhero, he has displayed a singular capacity to use his mass media presence to promote the dignity of the human person rather than his own ego and invites each of us to do the same.

NOTE

¹ FRANCIS, *Audience to Representatives of the Communications Media*, 16 March 2013.

² *Ibid.*

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ ID., *Address to the Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications*, 21 September 2013.

⁵ ID., *Message for the 48th World Communications Day*, 24 January 2014.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ T. TOBIN, «Pope Francis: The first six months», in *The Rhode Island Catholic* 9 September 2013, http://www.thercatholic.com/news/detail.html?sub_id=6041.

⁹ FRANCIS, «A Big Heart Open to God», *America*, <http://www.americamagazine.org/pope-interview>.

¹⁰ ID., *Address to the International Federation of Catholic Medical Associations*, 20 September 2013.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² ID., *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium*, 24 November 2013, n. 213.

¹³ ID., *Address to the Bishops of South Africa on their "ad limina" Visit*, 25 April 2014.

¹⁴ J. THAM, «A Catholic Reflects on Dialogue in the Abortion Debate», in *Journal of Clinical Research & Bioethics* 5/1 (2 January 2014).

¹⁵ J. H. WESTEN, «Check out all the times Pope Francis has spoken out on life and family issues», in *LifeSiteNews* (23 June 2014), <http://www.lifesitenews.com/blogs/check-out-all-the-times-pope-francis-has-spoken-out-on-life-and-family-issu>.