Vatican



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Pope Francis has added his voice to those calling for the stop of the spreading of so-called "fake news," comparing those who distribute disinformation to the Devil, who in one of the Judeo-Christian creation stories caused the fall of humanity by providing false information to Adam and Eve.

In his message for the 52 annual World Communications Day, released Jan. 24, the pontiff calls journalists "the protectors of news" and says they have a "weighty responsibility" to make sure that what they write is truthful and honest.

But the pope's message, given the title "'The truth will set you free:' Fake news and journalism for peace," does not acknowledge that the claim of false news has also been used recently by politicians such as U.S. President Donald Trump to discredit factual reporting for political purposes.

The message also does not mention that much of the attention on "fake news" originally came about thanks to widely verified reports that foreign actors, such as Russia, used sophisticated techniques to influence the outcome of the 2016 U.S. presidential election.

Francis says in his message that he wants to help society rediscover "the dignity of journalism and the personal responsibility of journalists to communicate the truth."

The pope then explains what fake news is, how to recognize it, and how to defend from it before proposing a new "journalism of peace."

The pope says that recognizing false information "calls for a profound and careful process of discernment" to recognize "snake-tactics" like those used by the Devil in the Genesis story to get Adam and Eve to eat the forbidden fruit.

"This biblical episode brings to light an essential element for our reflection: there is no such thing as harmless disinformation; on the contrary, trusting in falsehood can have dire consequences," says the pontiff. "Even a seemingly slight distortion of the truth can have dangerous effects."

Francis suggests that people can discern between real and fake news by considering whether the information they are reading is seeking only to divide people against each other.

"We can recognize the truth of statements from their fruits: whether they provoke quarrels, foment division, encourage resignation; or, on the other hand, they promote informed and mature reflection leading to constructive dialogue and fruitful results," he states.

The pope then claims that a journalists' primary responsibility is not to break news, but work for better understanding between peoples. The pontiff calls for a journalism "less concentrated on breaking news than on exploring the underlying causes of conflicts, in order to promote deeper understanding and contribute to their resolution by setting in place virtuous processes."

Francis ends the message with a re-tooling of St. Francis of Assisi's peace prayer, in which the pope asks: "where there is shouting, let us practice listening; where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony; where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity."

World Communications Day will be celebrated May 13. Francis released his message on the feast of St. Francis de Sales, patron saint of journalists.

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