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Telephone etiquette for 'the cold-call pope'

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The Francis Chronicles

Francis has already garnered a slew of informal titles, such as "the pope of surprises," "the pope of the poor," and "the people's pope." Given his growing penchant for phoning total strangers out of the blue, however, he may earn yet another one: "the cold-call pope."

Two such calls during August make the point.

On Aug. 18, Francis phoned Stefano Cabizza, a 19-year-old engineering student who lives in the Italian town of Padova whose family attended the pope's Mass for the Aug. 15 feast of the Assumption in Castel Gandolfo. Cabizza had brought a personal letter for the pope to the Mass and approached a cardinal during the service to hand it to him, thinking that was the end of things.

Three days later, however, the phone rang at mid-morning at the Cabizza home, and was answered by Cabizza's sister. The voice on the other end asked for Stefano, and when told he wasn't home, asked when he might return. Without knowing who was on the line, the sister replied, "Around 5 p.m.," and hung up.

Promptly at 5 p.m., the home phone rang again, this time answered directly by Stefano. To his astonishment, it was Francis calling. The pope thanked him for the letter and chatted for roughly eight minutes. (For the record, Francis made the call himself. No one came on beforehand to say, "Please hold for the pope.")

That exchange followed another impromptu phone call made by Francis 10 days earlier to Michele Ferri, the 14-year-old brother of a gas station operator in Pesaro, Italy, who had been killed during a robbery.

Ferri had also written to Francis, and the pope called the teenager to tell him the letter had made him cry and to promise prayers for his brother and his family.

In both cases, Francis reportedly insisted on using the informal Italian *tu* rather than the formal *Lei* in speaking to the youngsters. Reportedly, he jokingly asked Cabizza, "Do you think the apostles called Jesus *Lei*, or 'Your Excellency'?"

Also in both cases, it wasn't the young men who received the calls who revealed them to the wider world, but excited friends and neighbors. (In Cabizza's case, it was his parish priest who spread the word.) Neither Ferri nor Cabizza was willing to say much to reporters about the actual content of their talks, describing them only as deeply moving.

The idea of a pope calling up random people for informal chats has become a minor cultural sensation in Italy, so much so that famed columnist Beppe Severgnini published a set of tips for how to handle an unexpected call from the Supreme Pontiff in the country's leading newspaper, *Corriere della Sera*, on Friday.

Herewith, Severgnini's nine bits of advice concerning phone etiquette with His Holiness:

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1. "Papa Bergoglio is maybe the last guy on earth who actually calls land lines. If you hear your home phone ringing, therefore, get ready."
2. "Even if the pope tells you to use *tu*, thank him but stick with the classic *Lei* or the Spanish-ized *Voi*. Try not to go overboard, in one direction or the other. Calling him 'Frankie,' for instance, would be inappropriate. Exclaiming 'Your Holiness!' is predictable, but getting carried away with appellations such as 'Your Magnificence' or 'Your Megagalacticness' would be a little grotesque."
3. "Listen before speaking, and don't bring topics up yourself. If the conversation turns to his native Argentina, ask the pope how his countrymen behaved when he received the national soccer team. (Chaotically, the delegation was three times larger than anticipated.) While you're at it, ask what he thought about Ezequiel Lavezzi sitting on the papal throne." [Note: Lavezzi is an Argentine soccer star.]
4. "Don't be afraid to be normal, because a light touch is a gift. If Pope Francis wanted to be bored, he would have called a government minister."
5. "Don't talk about recent problems in the Vatican, which aren't his fault, and anyway are already very much on his mind. If the conversation turns to animals, it's prohibited to use the word 'crows'." [Note: 'Crows,' in Italian *i corvi*, is a popular euphemism in the Italian press for the presumed architects of the Vatican leaks affair.]
6. "Pope Francis has a good sense of humor. Tell him that's a beautiful thing, because irony is the sister of mercy; allowing yourself to smile and to forgive the imperfections of the world."
7. "Ask about Benedict's health, which will make him happy."
8. "Don't ask for anything practical ? the pope is an important man, but he's not a bureaucrat. If you start requesting recommendations, permission slips, concessions and favors from him, the pontiff will be sorry he ever called anybody in Italy and will disable the '+39' country code on his phone."
9. "Don't end the conversation yourself, but let the pontiff decide when to say goodbye. If your mom, your wife or your husband starts yelling from the kitchen, 'Come on, move it, the food's ready, get off the phone!', ignore them. Then, while you're pouring the wine, say: 'The Successor of Peter says hello. So, what's for dinner?'"

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