

## Francis: 'Want to preach? Listen'

Thomas C. Fox | Jan. 23, 2014 The Francis Chronicles

Once again, Pope Francis is telling the world to say less and listen more. Speaking to his church audience, he said Wednesday that effective evangelization does not involve selling religion -- delivering religious messages -- as much as it involves listening and engaging people with their questions and doubts.

Much of what Francis continues to say at first appears to be counterintuitive. How does one preach by listening? You get to his message by pondering more what he thinks it means to "preach," or rather to live, the Gospels. It is all about communication, which involves relating to one another, opening up to one another. Francis wants to reshape the way many of us have viewed religion, an instrument of communication. This is radical stuff. And his message might be more threatening were it not so completely bound up within the Gospels themselves.

If Francis' words seem, at first, paradoxical, it might be because paradox rests at the center of the Christian faith.

Recall the end words of the Prayer of St. Francis, the man after whom Pope Francis chose his name:

*"It is in giving that we receive; It is in pardoning that we are pardoned; It is in dying to self that we are born to eternal life."*

To a suffering world, a world many of us in more protected communities often fail to see, to a world in need, offering "religious messages" won't be enough, Francis said Wednesday. Engaging people where they are, in their hurt, in their brokenness, by first listening to them, this is the starting point.

This listening message was the theme of Francis' message for the 48th World Communication Day, presented at a [press conference in the Vatican](#) [1] Thursday.

Francis spoke of the need to form "a culture of encounter" to break down barriers and pockets of isolation. Such culture demands that we not only be ready to give, but also, perhaps more importantly, be ready to receive. Again the paradox: In being able to receive, we give. In listening, we encounter. Where our church leaders really able to understand and implement Francis' words our church would be quickly reformed.

The Internet, meanwhile, according to Francis, offers immense new possibilities for encounter and solidarity. As much as anything else, it is a sign of modern communication. It is a network of networks. On the Internet there are no hierarchies. The Internet tears apart hierarchies because information cannot be controlled on the Internet. Francis seems to know this intuitively.

While acknowledging that the Internet can isolate and create barricades between people, he said our Church "must respond with fresh energy and imagination to the challenges of the ongoing technological revolution." His embrace of these technologies suggests he knows his efforts to end monarchy within the church will eventually succeed -- with or without him.

And why encounter? Why the need for solidarity?

In answering these questions, Francis came back to the foundational theme in his pontificate. He spoke of the "scandalous gap between the opulence of the wealthy and the utter destitution of the poor."

He used the parable of the Good Samaritan to explain how we must see ourselves as true global neighbors, ready to take responsibility for the needs of others. Returning to one of his favorite themes, the Francis said our streets are teeming with people who are often hurting and looking for a sign of hope and salvation.

It's not enough to be passersby on the streets and digital highways of our world: rather we must keep open the doors of our churches and our digital environments so that people can enter and the Gospel message can reach to the ends of the earth.

Instead of fearing open communication, Francis is embracing such communication, and in so doing, he is attempting to tear down barriers, recognizing, when properly understood and used, open communication can do much good.

It preaches by opening channels among cultures, between rich and poor, among all members of the human family.

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