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Francis moves the conversation on dialogue forward

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NCR Today

Pope Francis released his first message for a World Communications Day on Jan. 24. It was the 48th World Communications Day, and the message was presented at a press conference at the Vatican.

Once again, the pope has said something truly remarkable. He starts off, as he has done many times, by mentioning the growing inequality throughout the world in eloquent terms. "We see a scandalous gap between the opulence of the wealthy and the utter destitution of the poor."

He explores the world of advancing technology and what it means for communication. He notes that it can help us grow closer and promote unity.

Yet it is in his discussion of dialogue where he moves the conversation dramatically forward. He says we have to be able to dialogue with the men and women of today, and that requires being attentive to what is happening around us. Then he says: "To dialogue means to believe that the 'other' has something worthwhile to say." Pope Francis goes on to say that we don't give up our beliefs in dialogue, but we do give up the "claim that they alone are valid or absolute."

It is true that Pope John Paul II spoke frequently and forcefully about the worth, value and dignity of every human person. Yet somehow, that was never translated into a change in the way we interacted or treated all of these worthwhile individuals.

History shows that the church has never really been able to accept the fact that other people with differing points of view or divergent beliefs should be afforded equal status. The Inquisition, of course, was the classic example of the church seeing itself as possessed of absolute truth, being unable to acknowledge any rights for those who did not possess this truth. More recently, the American bishops have seen fit to distort the concept of religious liberty in the United States, to make it mean that the point of view of the

church must be given preference beyond that of any other individual or group.

Now Pope Francis comes along and says you have to believe that everyone has something worthwhile to say. This must include people of other religions or no religion, people who challenge long-held beliefs or traditions, etc. Are these just words?

We have seen many words in the long history of the church and the papacy. Yet Francis seems to be less interested in words than in being. No one doubts his authenticity. He means precisely what he says.

Will we finally see a meaningful change in the church and its leaders? The change must first consist in a change of heart. Clergy and laity all must undergo self-reflection and, in some cases, dramatically change the way they see things and the way they act toward others. In this country, we need to see a greater willingness to engage in genuine dialogue on issues such as health care packages that meet the needs of all citizens and not just the bishops of the church. Greater openness and acceptance of the gay community and divorced and remarried Catholics would be other areas where a change in tone and behavior might be welcome.

In the church universal, ecumenism would be one place where these ideas could be put into practice. A good start would be recognizing that the reformers had some good points. There were areas that did indeed need to be reformed. As Francis might say, we need to recognize that other branches of Christianity have something to teach us.

A new vision of what a unified Christianity might look like is definitely in order. Even in the early years of ecumenism in the 1960s, I believe most Catholics envisioned a unified church essentially consisting of all other Christians returning to Rome and conducting liturgies and professing doctrine under the dictates of a Roman pontiff.

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A focus on what unites us would enable all of us to profess our unity in Christ, our *koinonia*. Our individual congregations might look quite different. A positive development might actually be Pope Benedict XVI's decision to create an Anglican ordinariate in which Anglicans could be part of the church while continuing with their own traditions and liturgies.

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