

“Communication and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter”

*panel discussion at the John Cardinal Foley Symposium
celebrating World Communications Day
May 26, 2016 @ Saint Charles Borromeo Seminary*



Thank you to St. Charles Borromeo Seminary and Fr. Thomas Dailey for inviting me to this year's John Cardinal Foley Symposium and to join this discussion.

I am humbled and very touched to be here on this day when we honor Cardinal Foley's memory and career.

In the early 1980's I attended a Catholic Press Association Convention here in Philadelphia. It was there that I first met Msgr. Foley during his second stint as Editor of the Catholic Standard & Times. I was impressed by both his presentation and his presence. He had a humble faith, a great sense of humor and a really solid grasp of the need, value and strength of Catholic media. He was one of several mentors who encouraged me to pursue a career in the Catholic Press. I am very grateful to him and proud to be one of his successors as President of the Catholic Press Association of the US and Canada.

Cardinal Foley was a model communicator and an excellent Catholic Communicator. He not only offered "well chosen" words, his voice delivered them with impact. His words were offered generously and kindly. They reflected his warm personality.

As Catholic Journalists and Communicators our patron Saint is St. Francis de Sales. His feast is the traditional beginning of Catholic Press Month celebrating all Catholic Media.

On Sunday, January 24th of this year, the feast of St Francis de Sales, Pope Francis offered his message for the 50th annual celebration of World Communications Day. As we know, the message is entitled “Communication and Mercy: A Fruitful Encounter.”

For me the most powerful sentences are in the third paragraph:

“Communication has the power to build bridges, to enable encounter and inclusion, and thus to enrich society. How beautiful it is when people select their words and actions with care, in the effort to avoid misunderstandings, to heal wounded memories and to build peace and harmony. Words can build bridges between individuals and within families, social groups and peoples. ... The words of Christians ought to be a constant encouragement to communion and, even in those cases where they must firmly condemn evil, they should never try to rupture relationships and communication.”

The fruits of communicating words of mercy from our faith to a needy world are healing, peace and bonding as one family.

It is significant that the Jubilee Year of Mercy follows Pope Francis’ visit to Philadelphia for the World Meeting of Families. The model of the family, the importance of the family to the Church and society and the need for healthy families is a large part of Pope Francis ministry and message.

This year’s World Communications Day message concludes with these words: “to communicate with mercy means to help and create a healthy, free and fraternal closeness between the children of God and all our brother and sisters in the one human family.”

In reading and re-reading the message for World Communication Day three major themes emerged for me.

The first theme is the nature of mercy.

Often speaking of the Church as a Field Hospital, Pope Francis identifies a central characteristic of mercy. It is offered as unconditional love to all who are wounded and suffering from the battles in their lives. Mercy has the power to heal, to restore and to nurture hope. All things the world needs.

For us to extend that mercy to those near and far is where our communication skills bear fruit. To quote from Pope Francis’ message, “I would like to encourage everyone to see society not as a forum where strangers compete to come out on top, but above all as a home or a family, where the door is always open and where everyone feels welcome.”

The second theme is the reminder that valid communication is two-way.

We need to listen, to hear and to reply. We can not ignore the cries of the poor in spirit, we can not be so distracted on our journey that we do not hear the calls for aid, we can not be so stone hearted to turn our backs or worse to attack those who have been persecuted.

We need to respond with prayer, encouragement and compassion. As Pope Francis wrote, “Knowing how to listen is an immense grace, it is a gift which we need to ask for and then make every effort to practice.”

The third theme is to use our gifts of communication mercifully and wisely.

We have all witnessed, if not experienced, the power of modern communication to inflict damage and pain. Lies and distortions can quickly go viral. Cyber-bullying destroys reputations and removes hope to the point of suicide. This year’s endless political campaigns have included some of the worst misuses of communications. It is not the tools of technology that are to blame.

It is the anger and hatred in people’s hearts, the mistrust and fear that drives their aggression. Their complete lack of mercy is to blame.

To quote from my grandmother, “if you can’t say something helpful be quiet”. We must work to always find words that are uplifting, encouraging, appreciative and comforting.

To refer back to the World Communications Day message again, “Harsh and moralistic words and actions risk further alienating those whom we wish to lead to conversion and freedom, reinforcing their sense of rejection and defensiveness.”

Finally, since I am from the Catholic Journalist side of the panel I would like to offer a few additional thoughts.

In the spirit of St. Francis de Sales, at its very essence being a Catholic Journalist is not about simply reporting, in the way secular media treats news.

As Catholic Journalists our role is threefold. We inform the Catholic Community about the work of the Church locally and around the world, and why it is important. We educate the faithful about the teachings of the Church under the guidance of our bishops. We evangelize by encouraging all to participate in the life of the Church.

Through my work in the Catholic Press Association I see many examples of outstanding Catholic communications and media. To just name three:

Here in Philadelphia, CatholicPhilly.com has developed digital platforms that give Catholic news the immediacy and reach that is needed in a mobile world.

In Brooklyn, NY, DeSales Media has incorporated TV, Radio, print and digital into a bilingual approach to reach as many souls as possible in the densely populated and diverse world of their diocese.

In Toronto, at Salt + Light TV, Fr. Tom Rosica started a Canadian Catholic TV network that now reaches around the world with high quality programming that celebrates faith in family life.

In Pope Francis' 2016 World Communications Day message I find inspiration and support.

We Catholic Journalists are called to use our professional skills to document the events of the Church and distribute the Good News to the faithful. The Good News may not always be good, but we need to deliver it with Mercy.

In his homily on Sunday May 8th, which was the observance of World Communication Day, The Holy Father said, "I offer cordial greetings to everyone working in the field of communications, and I hope that our ways of communicating in the Church will always have a clear Gospel style, and be conducted in a manner that unites truth in mercy."

Thank You again for allowing me to share these comments with you.

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