

Communication and Mercy

World Communications Day – May 8

It is not surprising that in his annual message for the World Day of Social Communications, Pope Francis would talk about mercy. That is the theme for this Jubilee year and is more than appropriate for any discussion about modern media.

When the Internet was launched, people had idealistic visions about how it would democratize communications around the world. We would carry on open and free discussions on serious global issues and exchange in an atmosphere of mutual respect.

Ah, that was so 1990s. Today, social media provide a notorious forum for the exchange of insults, threats of violence, pornography, crudity, banality and just plain nastiness. While there are vestiges of that old idealism here and there, and lots of heart-warming story-telling, too often comment chains in news forums descend quickly into battles between the outraged. Those who might

be of a more moderate inclination soon vacate the arena.

A little mercy would be helpful here. To quote Pope Francis:

The digital world is a public square, a meeting-place where we can either encourage or demean one another, engage in a meaningful discussion or unfair attacks. I pray that this Jubilee Year, lived in mercy, “may open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; and that it may eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination.” (Misericordiae Vultus, 23) The Internet can help us to be better citizens. Access to digital networks entails a responsibility for our neighbour whom we do not see but who is nonetheless real and has a dignity which must be respected. The Internet can be used wisely to build a society which is healthy and open to sharing. (from Message for World Communications Day 2016)

To get there, everyone has a part to play. Our leaders,

whether politicians, bureaucrats, civic leaders, corporate executives, or even celebrities engaged in public debate need to refrain from insulting others, and instead strive to foster reconciliation. Francis reminds us that “blessed are the peacemakers.” Individuals can keep in mind that others who use social media are human beings, too. As such, they deserve respect, not scorn. And church leaders, in their own communications, must keep in mind to “uphold the truth with love.”

A key aspect of mercy in communications is to learn to

listen. This is not just hearing or absorbing information. It is about understanding the other, to ponder what they have said. “Knowing how to listen is an immense grace, it is a gift which we need to ask for and then make every effort to practise,” the Pope writes.

The aim of communication in a social media world should not be to score points by demeaning others. It should be to foster understanding and love, to truly help us become a global village.

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Visit vatican.va to read the full Message for World Communications Day 2016.