

'Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter'

Ahead of World Communications Day, which falls on 1 June this year, Archbishop Eamon Martin, Chair of the Irish Bishops' Council for Communications speaks about the Pope's message for this year and the challenge of communicating the gospel in 2014

Why does the Church celebrate World Communications Day?

World Communications Day is a significant day; in fact it was the only celebration called for by the Second Vatican Council. It has been celebrated each year since 1967 on the Sunday before Pentecost, and this year that falls on the feast of the Ascension, 1 June.

In initiating World Communications Day, Pope Paul VI wanted to draw attention to the enormous potential that the communications media has for cultural transformation. He saw both the opportunities to enhance the lives of people with values of truth. He also recognised the challenge to avoid spreading 'less than noble' ideas, which can demean people.

World Communications Day provides us with an opportunity to reflect on the opportunities and challenges presented by the modern means of social communication (from newspapers and television to social media) in the new evangelisation.

What is the theme of this year's message?

At the heart of this year's message ('Communication at the Service of an Authentic Culture of Encounter') Pope Francis is inviting us to reflect on what it means for us to encounter others in the light of the Gospel. He makes use of the parable of 'The Good Samaritan' to challenge us, in all our communications, to become 'neighbours' to one another, and especially to those who are isolated or excluded in any way. Pope Francis says 'As I have frequently observed, if a choice has to be made between a bruised Church which goes out to the streets and a Church suffering from self-absorption, I certainly prefer the first. Those "streets" are the world where people live and where they can be reached, both effectively and affectively.'

The choice of the word 'encounter' in the title of the message is no



accident. Pope Francis' message prompts us to reflect on deeper questions, such as 'Why do we communicate?' The answer to this question is on one level simple - in order to get to know one another, to meet other people. Yet, true communication is a two-way process where we also connect with one another at a deeper level; we encounter the other person by listening as well as talking, by being truly present to them in order to receive as well as give.

We sometimes mistakenly think that we have sole responsibility for bringing the gospel to the ends of the earth. It is helpful to realise that we are not alone. Christ promised that he will be with us, until the end of time. We do not have to do everything. Our task might simply be to bring people to Christ and let Him take over. Letting Christ work through us can help produce wonderful results. So maybe we should look at communication as facilitating the encounter between people and Christ - if we can manage that we have achieved something truly worthwhile.

However, this does not mean we can sit back and be passive. As Pope Francis says, it is not enough to be a 'passer-by' on the digital highways. I therefore echo his encouragement to people of faith to be present as neighbours in the digital media and to

bring the message and compassion of Christ to all those they meet online. We have to get out there and spread the gospel wherever we are, both in the 'real' world and the 'virtual world'. The digital highway is 'a street teeming with people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope'. By means of the internet, the Christian message can reach 'to the ends of the earth' (Acts 1:8).

Is there anything that you find particularly striking in Pope Francis' message this year?

There are a couple of things which immediately jumped out at me when I first read the Pope's message. Pope Francis values modern communications, for example, he says: 'The internet, in particular, offers immense possibilities for encounter and solidarity. This is something truly good, a gift from God.' Alongside this, he emphasises that communication is not an end in itself. He says 'media strategies do not ensure beauty, goodness and truth in communication. The world of media also has to be concerned with humanity.' We need to be alert to this. The heart of our communication needs to be 'connecting with' people. The goal of our communication is to spread the gospel of Jesus Christ and bring His truth into lives of people.

I also love the language of the conclusion of the message. It offers a gentle and beautiful challenge from our Holy Father: 'Let our communication be a balm which relieves pain and a fine wine which gladdens hearts. May the light we bring to others not be the result of cosmetics or special effects, but rather of our being loving and merciful "neighbours" to those wounded and left on the side of the road.' I was particularly taken by Pope Francis' call: 'Let us boldly become citizens of the digital world. The Church needs to be concerned for, and present in, the world of communication, in order to dialogue

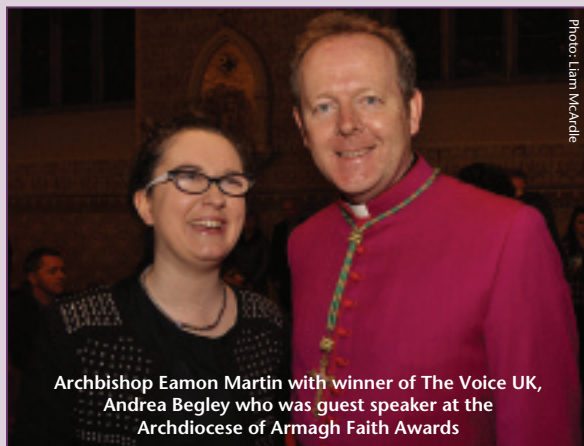
with people today and to help them encounter Christ.'

You have recently been appointed as Chair of the Bishops' Conference Council for Communications, what do you see as the challenges and opportunities facing the Church with regards to communicating the Gospel in 2014?

The challenge I suppose would be presenting what may be termed 'a counter-cultural message' in what is sometimes a hostile environment. This challenge is nothing new, as the passage in the Gospel of Luke reminds us, where Jesus says 'I send you out as lambs among wolves' when he is commissioning seventy-two disciples to travel ahead of him (Luke 10:3). We are going to be attacked, but that does not mean we should shut up shop and go home – quite the opposite in fact!

People are still hungry for good news; they want hope and the hope that the gospel provides can still feed people who hunger for purpose and fulfilment in life. In the short time since my appointment as Coadjutor Archbishop of Armagh I have met thousands of people who see their faith as a source of inspiration, the bedrock on which they build their lives. Countless people have asked me to be with them, to hear their story, to say a prayer for them. People yearn for the good news, about life, family, meaning in suffering, courage when distressed, depth in the midst of so much that is fleeting and cosmetic in the world. Our challenge is to present the good news in a language that is fresh, accessible and merciful – as my episcopal motto puts it – to sing a new song to the Lord.

Perhaps we are too often focused on the global, or even the national, picture, that can seem to be all doom and gloom; we have to be aware that much of what happens in the Church happens at a local level and many parishes and dioceses are developing a strong presence on the internet, through web streaming of Mass and other liturgies, sacred prayer spaces online and engaging with parishioners on social media. These are means of connecting directly with people. I think it is important for parishes to make use of digital platforms to assist their ministry. Nothing will surpass the face-to-face encounter with people, but it is important to be present in digital forums, especially with regard to young people – as Pope Francis has



Archbishop Eamon Martin with winner of The Voice UK, Andrea Begley who was guest speaker at the Archdiocese of Armagh Faith Awards

said to go out into the 'digital highways' which are teeming with people who are searching for the truth that is found in the gospel.

I would love to see a digital missionary movement launched from Ireland, perhaps during the forthcoming 14th centenary year of St Columbanus, the great Irish missionary. I have in mind the idea of calling people to be online missionaries, sailing out into the 'digital sea', spreading the gospel on the 'digital continent' whilst at the same time joining together in an online community of prayer and other commitments. Watch this space!

People often mention social media when speaking about communication today and you have your own Twitter account (@ArchbishopEamon), how have you found the world of Twitter?

I must say I have found it a positive experience so far. One of the things that Pope Francis is saying in his message this year is that we need to meet people where they are. And for many, especially young people, the digital arena is where they are. At the recent John Paul II awards in Armagh, lots of people were tweeting about the awards (or even their selfies with the Archbishop!), but of course the most important thing is that they were taking part in the awards themselves and not just tweeting about it.

The challenge is how to engage these young people as witnesses to 'give soul' to the internet, to bring the presence of Christ into the digital environment.

You might say that one of the challenges of Twitter is saying something meaningful in 140 characters. Yet when you think about some of Jesus' most memorable phrases could have fitted into a Tweet: the Beatitudes, or some of the short parables on the kingdom of heaven.

These are images which hopefully invite people to reflect and dig deeper.

The media (and indeed the world) seem to be captivated by Pope Francis – why do you think this might be? What has Pope Francis done to capture the hearts and minds of people?

One aspect that has shone through in his papacy so far is joy. It is easy to see where *The Joy of the Gospel* got its name. Joy and mercy have almost become watchwords for Pope

Francis' ministry. He recognises that if Christians want people to believe in the *good* news they need to have joy – not only in the hearts, but also on their faces, as the Holy Father says in one of his memorable turns of phrase 'an evangeliser must never look like someone who has just come back from a funeral!' (EG, 9)

In the early days when the Church was trying to make its way in a hostile Empire, many people remarked on the joy and love that they showed, so much so that people were able to say 'Look how these Christians love one another.' That is what is at the heart of what Christianity is all about and something that Pope Francis encapsulates. He must be the most photographed Pope ever and he is very adept at evangelising via these images. We see lots of photos of him smiling – exuding the joy of the gospel, but also images that are amazingly profound of him reaching out and showing love to people who some might deem outcasts, washing the feet of prisoners and of elderly people with disabilities; embracing people as he travels through St Peter's Square in the Pope mobile. Pope Francis shows us the gospel in action.

However, this is not just a show; there is a real depth behind not only what he says, but also what Pope Francis does. Like Christ he is setting an example for us to follow, challenging us to reach out to our neighbour in need and, like the Good Samaritan, to come to the assistance of those less fortunate than we are. I think it is impossible not to be challenged by what Pope Francis says and does; he is constantly encouraging us to become better people and better Christians, inviting us to make a difference in the world by reaching out to those in need, to 'people who are often hurting, men and women looking for salvation or hope'.