

**Insights into Pope Francis' Pastoral Communication
(excerpts from his address to the U.S. Bishops on September 23, 2015)**

During his visit to the United States, Pope Francis has shown us in his choices, gestures, and words, how to effectively communicate the Gospel today. In his talk to the U.S. Bishops at St. Matthew's Cathedral on Wednesday, September 23, the Pope lays out some key pastoral principles that can be applied not just to the bishops, but to everyone seeking to communicate the Gospel. I've been so inspired by this particular talk that I'd like to share some of my thoughts about how the Pope is inviting us to be more pastoral in our communication.

[The entire text of his talk can be found here:](http://www.windowstothesoul.wordpress.com) I'm presenting some highlights that particularly struck me. – Sr. Marie Paul Curley, FSP (www.windowstothesoul.wordpress.com)

<p>Excerpts from the address of Pope Francis to the U.S. Bishops Wednesday, September 23, 2015:</p>	
<p>The heart of the Pope expands to include everyone. To testify to the immensity of God's love is the heart of the mission entrusted to the Successor of Peter, the Vicar of the One who on the cross embraced the whole of mankind. May no member of Christ's Body and the American people feel excluded from the Pope's embrace. Wherever the name of Jesus is spoken, may the Pope's voice also be heard to affirm that: "He is the Savior"! From your great coastal cities to the plains of the Midwest, from the deep South to the far reaches of the West, wherever your people gather in the Eucharistic assembly, may the Pope be not simply a name but a felt presence, sustaining the fervent plea of the Bride: "Come, Lord!"</p> <p>Whenever a hand reaches out to do good or to show the love of Christ, to dry a tear or bring comfort to the lonely, to show the way to one who is lost or to console a broken heart, to help the fallen or to teach those thirsting for truth, to forgive or to offer a new start in God... know that the Pope is at your side, the Pope supports you. He puts his hand on your own, a hand wrinkled with age, but by God's grace still able to support and encourage.</p> <p>....</p>	<p>After his greetings, the Pope defines his role as he sees it: to witness to God's love which Jesus poured out to us on the cross. This love is universal, spousal, merciful, selflessly reaching out in love to the suffering and vulnerable.</p> <p>How do we define our role as communicators of Christ?</p> <p>The Pope powerfully affirms <i>his</i> support every time <i>we</i> reach out in love to a suffering brother or sister.</p> <p>The Pope continues by appreciating the remarkable history of the Church in the USA.</p>
<p>I am also conscious of the courage with which you have faced difficult moments in the recent history of the Church in this country without fear of self-criticism and at the cost of mortification and great sacrifice. Nor have you been afraid to divest whatever is unessential in order to regain the authority and</p>	<p>Without making it the center of his talk, Pope Francis is not afraid to directly address the recent scandals and crises in the Church, and the suffering that has resulted from it. His approach—already widely known from</p>

<p>trust which is demanded of ministers of Christ and rightly expected by the faithful. I realize how much the pain of recent years has weighed upon you and I have supported your generous commitment to bring healing to victims – in the knowledge that in healing we too are healed – and to work to ensure that such crimes will never be repeated.</p>	<p>his work in Rome—is reiterated: direct support of efforts to bring healing to those who have been injured and reform to the Church.</p>
<p>...</p>	<p>The Pope talks about shared experiences as a pastor evangelizing a vast land on the American continents; he references an American poet and previous papal U.S. visits</p>
<p>It is not my intention to offer a plan or to devise a strategy. I have not come to judge you or to lecture you. I trust completely in the voice of the One who “teaches all things” (Jn 14:26). Allow me only, in the freedom of love, to speak to you as a brother among brothers. I have no wish to tell you what to do, because we all know what it is that the Lord asks of us. Instead, I would turn once again to the demanding task – ancient yet never new – of seeking out the paths we need to take and the spirit with which we need to work. Without claiming to be exhaustive, I would share with you some reflections which I consider helpful for our mission.</p>	<p>Without taking away from his authority, the Pope humbly offers suggestions as “a brother among brothers.” He is showing us here by example exactly what he states later: <i>“The richer the heritage which you are called to share with parrhesia, the more eloquent should be the humility with which you should offer it.”</i> And he emphasizes again the mission of the Church, which seems to be his primary pastoral concern.</p>
<p>We are bishops of the Church, shepherds appointed by God to feed his flock. Our greatest joy is to be shepherds, and only shepherds, pastors with undivided hearts and selfless devotion. We need to preserve this joy and never let ourselves be robbed of it. The evil one roars like a lion, anxious to devour it, wearing us down in our resolve to be all that we are called to be, not for ourselves but in gift and service to the “Shepherd of our souls” (1 Pet 2:25).</p>	<p>The Pope stands shoulder to shoulder with his bishops here: “We are bishops...” And he offers clear direction to the identity of the bishop, but also for the “pastoral spirit” which all communicators of Christ are to have.</p> <p>Blessed James Alberione, a pioneer in using the media to carry out the Church’s mission of evangelization, used to emphasize that having “a pastoral heart” was key for the evangelizer. Not all of us who evangelize are called to be a “shepherd” in the sense of bishop or pastor of a parish. But all evangelizers are called to have hearts that seek the good of those with whom we communicate, and we are to weigh what we say and how</p>

	<p>we say it in that light. In a similar way Pope Francis calls religious and priests to be spiritual mothers & fathers.</p>
<p>The heart of our identity is to be sought in constant prayer, in preaching (Acts 6:4) and in shepherding the flock entrusted to our care (Jn 21:15-17; Acts 20:28-31).</p> <p>Ours must not be just any kind of prayer, but familiar union with Christ, in which we daily encounter his gaze and sense that he is asking us the question: “Who is my mother? Who are my brothers?” (Mk 3:31-34). One in which we can calmly reply: “Lord, here is your mother, here are your brothers! I hand them over to you; they are the ones whom you entrusted to me”. Such trusting union with Christ is what nourishes the life of a pastor.</p>	<p>These are the three key practices which every communicator of Christ needs to root ourselves in because we find our true selves affirmed in them.</p> <p>This is great advice for prayer, and also to bring to an examination of conscience to make sure that our prayer (and therefore our attention) is not focused solely on ourselves.</p>
<p>It is not about preaching complicated doctrines, but joyfully proclaiming Christ who died and rose for our sake. The “style” of our mission should make our hearers feel that the message we preach is meant “for us”. May the word of God grant meaning and fullness to every aspect of their lives; may the sacraments nourish them with that food which they cannot procure for themselves; may the closeness of the shepherd make them long once again for the Father’s embrace. Be vigilant that the flock may always encounter in the heart of their pastor that “taste of eternity” which they seek in vain in the things of this world. May they always hear from you a word of appreciation for their efforts to confirm in liberty and justice the prosperity in which this land abounds. At the same time, may you never lack the serene courage to proclaim that “we must work not for the food which perishes, but for the food which endures for eternal life” (Jn 6:27).</p>	<p>Pope Francis has really captured here <i>how</i> he evangelizes. Preaching is not primarily about theological precision (that is for the theologians), but about helping people to encounter Christ, helping people to “feel” the Word of God so that it can take effect in their everyday lives. It’s a heart-to-heart communication, which we’ve witnessed as Pope Francis has spoken to us, most especially at the World Meeting of Families.</p>
<p>Shepherds who do not pasture themselves but are able to step back, away from the center, to “decrease”, in order to feed God’s family with Christ. Who keep constant watch, standing on the heights to look out with God’s eyes on the flock which is his alone. Who ascend to the height of the cross of God’s Son, the sole standpoint which opens to the shepherd the heart of his flock. Shepherds who do not lower our gaze, concerned only with our concerns, but raise it constantly toward the horizons which God opens before us and which surpass all that we ourselves can</p>	<p>Pope Francis continues with his explanation of the selflessness of the “good shepherd”: for me, this is the selflessness required in true communication. These paragraphs remind me to pray with the Canticum in Philippians 2:6-11.</p>

foresee or plan. Who also watch over ourselves, so as to flee the temptation of narcissism, which blinds the eyes of the shepherd, makes his voice unrecognizable and his actions fruitless. In the countless paths which lie open to your pastoral concern, remember to keep focused on the core which unifies everything: "You did it unto me" (Mt 25:31-45).

Certainly it is helpful for a bishop to have the farsightedness of a leader and the shrewdness of an administrator, but we fall into hopeless decline whenever we confuse the power of strength with the strength of that powerlessness with which God has redeemed us. Bishops need to be lucidly aware of the battle between light and darkness being fought in this world. Woe to us, however, if we make of the cross a banner of worldly struggles and fail to realize that the price of lasting victory is allowing ourselves to be wounded and consumed (Phil 2:1-11).

We all know the anguish felt by the first Eleven, huddled together, assailed and overwhelmed by the fear of sheep scattered because the shepherd had been struck. But we also know that we have been given a spirit of courage and not of timidity. So we cannot let ourselves be paralyzed by fear.

I know that you face many challenges, and that the field in which you sow is unyielding and that there is always the temptation to give in to fear, to lick one's wounds, to think back on bygone times and to devise harsh responses to fierce opposition.

Confusing strength and the powerlessness of God is an easy temptation for any follower of Christ, but especially those of us entrusted with a pastoral mission, including communicating the Gospel. Pope Francis' eloquent "woe to us" makes for a great examination of conscience that I will regularly bring to my prayer!

As communicators, we are also called to good stewardship. Are we aware of the greatness of our call, and the immense power that we hold in our hands with the media, which have the power to influence minds and hearts, ultimately to transform society? How do we carry the responsibility of wielding the power of the media, and remember to rely on the powerlessness of God, which is greater than any power of the world?

True selfless ministry and communication means that we will be wounded, we are consumed. As Pope Francis spoke of earlier at the canonization of St. Junípero Serra, we only know the joy of the Gospel when we give it away, and ourselves along with it.

One temptation, especially in the midst of the hostility of those who do not understand or resist the Gospel, is to give in to fear or to look back on "the way things were." It's easier to communicate what we know will be appreciated, but we are also called to communicate the Truth that is harder for people to hear. Fear can lead us to communicate harshly or to give up. How do I let fear shape my communication?

	<p>Appreciating our history, we want to keep moving forward as God calls us today. We are called to evangelize, to communicate Christ, to the people of <i>today</i>.</p>
<p>And yet we are promoters of the culture of encounter. We are living sacraments of the embrace between God’s riches and our poverty. We are witnesses of the abasement and the condescension of God who anticipates in love our every response.</p> <p>Dialogue is our method, not as a shrewd strategy but out of fidelity to the One who never wearies of visiting the marketplace, even at the eleventh hour, to propose his offer of love (Mt 20:1-16). The path ahead, then, is dialogue among yourselves, dialogue in your presbyterates, dialogue with lay persons, dialogue with families, dialogue with society. I cannot ever tire of encouraging you to dialogue fearlessly. The richer the heritage which you are called to share with parrhesia, the more eloquent should be the humility with which you should offer it. Do not be afraid to set out on that “exodus” which is necessary for all authentic dialogue. Otherwise, we fail to understand the thinking of others, or to realize deep down that the brother or sister we wish to reach and redeem, with the power and the closeness of love, counts more than their positions, distant as they may be from what we hold as true and certain. Harsh and divisive language does not befit the tongue of a pastor, it has no place in his heart; although it may momentarily seem to win the day, only the enduring allure of goodness and love remains truly convincing.</p>	<p>As communicators, this is exactly what we are about: fostering true encounters, and fostering those encounters into relationships that lead to an ever greater communion. Pope Francis’ Message for World Day of Communication in 2014 was about communicating in ways that create a culture of encounter in today’s world threatened by fragmentation. The communications media—and our every communicative act—can foster encounter, listening, love, and true relationships, or it can exclude, shut out, or silence.</p> <p>Dialogue is our way: Pope Francis is here offering us his pastoral way of communicating that is uniquely suited to our times.</p> <p>The “exodus” which Pope Francis speaks about here means leaving behind ego, narcissism, intolerance, exclusion, divisiveness—any habit, way of thinking, or behavior—that can prevent us from entering into dialogue, from truly listening, from creatively responding in love. Below, Pope Francis speaks about “learning Jesus,” communicating in a way that is humble.</p>

<p>We need to let the Lord’s words echo constantly in our hearts: “Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me, who am meek and humble of heart, and you will find refreshment for your souls” (Mt 11:28-30). Jesus’ yoke is a yoke of love and thus a pledge of refreshment. At times in our work we can be burdened by a sense of loneliness, and so feel the heaviness of the yoke that we forget that we have received it from the Lord. It seems to be ours alone, and so we drag it like weary oxen working a dry field, troubled by the thought that we are laboring in vain. We can forget the profound refreshment which is indissolubly linked to the One who has made us the promise.</p> <p>We need to learn from Jesus, or better to learn Jesus, meek and humble; to enter into his meekness and his humility by contemplating his way of acting; to lead our Churches and our people – not infrequently burdened by the stress of everyday life – to the ease of the Lord’s yoke. And to remember that Jesus’ Church is kept whole not by “consuming fire from heaven” (Lk 9:54), but by the secret warmth of the Spirit, who “heals what is wounded, bends what is rigid, straightens what is crooked”.</p>	<p>We can never forget to begin with our “audience,” or those whom we are seeking to communicate with. Begin with the concerns of the other.</p> <p>Jesus is our way; Jesus teaches us how to communicate, how to dialogue (See Phil. 2:6-11).</p>
<p>The great mission which the Lord gives us is one which we carry out in communion, collegially. The world is already so torn and divided, brokenness is now everywhere. Consequently, the Church, “the seamless garment of the Lord” cannot allow herself to be rent, broken or fought over.</p> <p>Our mission as bishops is first and foremost to solidify unity, a unity whose content is defined by the Word of God and the one Bread of Heaven. With these two realities each of the Churches entrusted to us remains Catholic, because open to, and in communion with, all the particular Churches and with the Church of Rome which “presides in charity”. It is imperative, therefore, to watch over that unity, to safeguard it, to promote it and to bear witness to it as a sign and instrument which, beyond every barrier, unites nations, races, classes and generations.</p>	<p>We cannot forget that the ultimate goal of all communication is to bring everyone— all of humanity— into communion with each other and with God. We can witness to communion by our collaboration and unity in working together as Church.</p> <p>Ronald Rolheiser has an interesting insight on this in his recent article on what heaven might be like.</p>
<p>May the forthcoming Holy Year of Mercy, by drawing us into the fathomless depths of God’s heart in which no division dwells, be for all of you a privileged moment for strengthening communion, perfecting unity, reconciling differences, forgiving one another</p>	<p>A beautiful insight into Pope Francis’ motivation for declaring the Holy Year of Mercy, especially in light of his pleas for unity and reconciliation throughout his</p>

<p>and healing every rift, that your light may shine forth like “a city built on a hill” (Mt 5:14).</p>	<p>U.S. visit. A focus for our communication during the Year of Mercy can be building unity.</p>
<p>This service to unity is particularly important for this nation, whose vast material and spiritual, cultural and political, historical and human, scientific and technological resources impose significant moral responsibilities in a world which is seeking, confusedly and laboriously, new balances of peace, prosperity and integration. It is an essential part of your mission to offer to the United States of America the humble yet powerful leaven of communion. May all mankind know that the presence in its midst of the “sacrament of unity” (<i>Lumen Gentium</i>, 1) is a guarantee that its fate is not decay and dispersion.</p> <p>This kind of witness is a beacon whose light can reassure men and women sailing through the dark clouds of life that a sure haven awaits them, that they will not crash on the reefs or be overwhelmed by the waves. I encourage you, then, my brothers, to confront the challenging issues of our time. Ever present within each of them is life as gift and responsibility. The future freedom and dignity of our societies depends on how we face these challenges.</p>	<p>Pope Francis highlights the importance of unity within the USA, which has significant influence in the rest of the world. The U.S. carries great responsibility here. This growth in unity offers hope for the present and future of the USA, which is beset by so many challenges.</p>
<p>The innocent victim of abortion, children who die of hunger or from bombings, immigrants who drown in the search for a better tomorrow, the elderly or the sick who are considered a burden, the victims of terrorism, wars, violence and drug trafficking, the environment devastated by man’s predatory relationship with nature – at stake in all of this is the gift of God, of which we are noble stewards but not masters. It is wrong, then, to look the other way or to remain silent. No less important is the Gospel of the Family, which in the World Meeting of Families in Philadelphia I will emphatically proclaim together with you and the entire Church.</p> <p>These essential aspects of the Church’s mission belong to the core of what we have received from the Lord. It is our duty to preserve and communicate them, even when the tenor of the times becomes resistant and even hostile to that message (<i>Evangelii Gaudium</i>, 34-39). I urge you to offer this witness, with the means and creativity born of love, and with the humility of truth. It needs to be</p>	<p>Pope Francis calls us to be faithful to the message of the Gospel. We communicate the truth in love, and we carefully choose how we communicate, but we do not stop communicating the truth because we experience resistance, or because our culture is hostile to the Gospel message. I love how he puts it: we communicate with the best means at our disposal, with creativity, with love, with humility, and truth. We are not seeking to form a society that gives lip service to the Gospel, but to change people and society from within hearts and consciences, because <i>that</i> transformation is lasting.</p> <p>The phrase “humility of truth” stands out here in its simple eloquence. Truth needs to be</p>

<p>preached and proclaimed to those without, but also to find room in people’s hearts and in the conscience of society.</p>	<p>proclaimed, explained, even defended, but it has no need to be triumphal nor defensive; it is true and that is enough. Truth speaks for itself.</p>
<p>To this end, it is important that the Church in the United States also be a humble home, a family fire which attracts men and women through the attractive light and warmth of love. As pastors, we know well how much darkness and cold there is in this world; we know the loneliness and the neglect experienced by many people, even amid great resources of communication and material wealth. We also know their fear in the face of life, their despair and the many forms of escapism to which it gives rise. Consequently, only a Church which can gather around the family fire remains able to attract others. And not any fire, but the one which blazed forth on Easter morn. The risen Lord continues to challenge the Church’s pastors through the quiet plea of so many of our brothers and sisters: “Have you something to eat?” We need to recognize the Lord’s voice, as the apostles did on the shore of the lake of Tiberius (Jn 21:4-12). It becomes even more urgent to grow in the certainty that the embers of his presence, kindled in the fire of his passion, precede us and will never die out. Whenever this certainty weakens, we end up being caretakers of ash, and not guardians and dispensers of the true light and the warmth which causes our hearts to burn within us (Lk 24:32).</p>	<p>One more time Pope Francis calls us to communicate and live our faith not in a judgmental, triumphalistic, or elitist way, but in humility, seeking the presence of the Lord in the hunger of our brothers and sisters.</p>
<p>.... You can find the entire message to the U.S. Bishops here.</p>	<p>Pope Francis concludes with two pleas for the bishops: to stay close to the people, especially his priests, and to continue to welcome and promote the cause of immigrants. He says it beautifully: “Offer them the warmth of the love of Christ and you will unlock the mystery of their heart.” How can we communicate in love and “unlock the mystery of the heart” of those whom we seek to communicate with?</p>