



SUNDAY, 17 MAY 2015, FEAST OF THE ASCENSION OF THE LORD

HOMILY NOTES

This year's World Communications Day comes roughly half-way between the two Synods of Bishops on the Family, so Pope Francis has chosen to focus on the family as "A Privileged Place of Encounter with the Gift of Love". He says some beautiful things about families, but he is not speaking about some ideal or perfect family, as you will see if you read his message. Here are some reflections on the message, which may spark off ideas for your homily that weekend.

1. Let us start with the conclusion of the message, its last two paragraphs; there we find a phrase that sounds obvious, but it bears pondering: "Families should be seen as a resource rather than as a problem for society". That would be a remarkable element in a party manifesto, would it not? Families that are healthy, above all in terms of their internal relationships, are an invaluable asset in any society. These paragraphs urge us to work "to build a better future for the world in which we live" rather than "fighting to defend the past". There is a hint here not to be weighed down by the enormous challenges of changing legislation on marriage and the family, because that can distract us from the need to do all we can to help real families in their real lives, with all the difficulties they can have. This spurs us into creative mode: how do I support the people sitting in front of me on a Sunday rather than turning family life into "a subject of debate or a terrain for ideological skirmishes"? We can find ourselves locked into discussions often dictated by the media, rather than rejoicing in family life "as a setting where we can all learn what it means to communicate in a love received and returned". The Holy Father is certainly not suggesting that we should ignore the way some politicians, academics and others have chosen to dismantle traditional visions of marriage and the family. He is saying that we should emphasise our positive message of encouragement and support for families, while never abandoning those debates. As he says, "All too often things get simplified, different positions and viewpoints are pitted against one another, and people are invited to take sides, rather than to see things as a whole". He wants us to do our best to ensure that the life of families does not become 'collateral damage' in an ideological battle.

2. This is the 49th World Communications Day. The tradition dates from a point where the Church began to stress the importance of communications media in the life of society and of the Church herself. It has been part of a growing awareness of the fact that we, the Church, can use all modern means of communication to carry out our task of bringing the Gospel to every person on the planet. But we can all see that new media, particularly because of the hold they have on younger people, "can be both a help and a hindrance to communication in and between families". Modern media are a hindrance when the caricature of a youngster shut away in a room becomes a reality, when 'social' media enable people to avoid both face-to-face contact with other people and, at the same time, the deep need we all have for regular periods of silence. But they definitely have positive effects "when they enable people to tell their stories, to stay in contact with distant friends, to thank others or seek their forgiveness, and to open the door to new encounters". Pope Francis thinks the Christian community needs to help families to learn and to teach their children how to live in our media-dominated environment in such a way that "we will employ technology wisely, rather than letting ourselves be dominated by it". Once again there is space to develop a homily that is not gloomy, but offers realistic pointers to using communications media in ways that enhance our lives. There is room for holiness in all these things. The point of this part of the Pope's message is "to learn once again how to talk to one another, not simply how to generate and consume information".



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3. The heart of Pope Francis' message this year is the origin of communication, beginning with the sacred link between a mother and the child in her womb, which he describes as "the first 'school' of communication, a place where we begin to familiarise ourselves with the outside world within a protected environment, with the reassuring sounds of the mother's heartbeat". Some of us remember visiting the Science Museum decades ago and sitting in a huge artificial womb, where subdued light and a recorded heartbeat made it tempting to linger in utter calm. That feeling of security really is part of life in families "at their best". Being one of a family allows us to 'relativise' differences of age, gender and opinion; these things hardly matter in the way they often do in the hurly-burly of daily life. There is a spontaneous recognition of where I come from and where I belong, and the language I hear 'at home' colours the way I communicate for the rest of my life, even the way I think. Our families are definitely schools of communication, and our early family life will be the most significant and lasting influence on how we relate to people and communicate with them. Our culture has moved away from the strong public awareness there used to be of our Christian tradition, so Christian families are more or less the only place where children hear of Jesus Christ and learn to pray. Catholic parents need encouragement and guidance in what to pass on to their children and how to do it. "In a world where people often curse, use foul language, speak badly of others, sow discord and poison our environment by gossip, the family can teach us to understand communication as a blessing". So how can I encourage parents and guardians in their overwhelming task of educating the next generations by breaking the spiral of evil, showing that goodness is always possible, and educating their children to fellowship? This is the most challenging but positive and transformative form of communication.

4. The most unexpected paragraph in this message is a gem, potentially a great starting-point for your Sunday homily. Pope Francis is convinced that "families who have children with one or more disabilities have much to teach us". Such a situation can close people in on themselves, but it is so often, "thanks to the love of parents, siblings and friends, an incentive to openness, sharing and ready communication with all. It can also help schools, parishes and associations to become more welcoming and inclusive of everyone". Hear, hear!

See Pope Francis's World Communications Day 2015 message here:

www.catholicnews.org.uk/wcd15-popes-message