

» Pope Francis: master of strategic communication

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Since his appointment as head of the Catholic Church, the Argentinean Jorge Mario Bergoglio has not just undertaken significant and transcendental changes at an internal level and vis-à-vis his believers. Moreover, he has given a master class in strategic communication.

As a result of the deep crisis of the Church caused by the pederasty and corruption scandals involving some of its leaders, Benedict XVI resigned on 11 February 2013. The new prelate, elected on 13 March of that year, faced important challenges: how could he improve the image of the Catholic Church and the curia? How could he stop the desertion of the believers? Should the Church change its discourse and adapt it to our times? Was it crucial to include the minorities that up to now were excluded, such as the LGBT community? Should the Church rectify and accept those who are divorced? Should the Church dialogue and approach other Christian denominations and religions? Deep changes and a strong communication strategy were needed in order to improve the Vatican's reputation and support the new Pope's management.

COMMUNICATING AND LEGITIMISING MESSAGES THROUGH FACTS

Since Francis was elected and presented himself to the believers, the world understood that he would not be as his predecessors. The Pontiff did not followed the protocol and went out onto St-Peters Basilica central balcony dressed with only a white cassock, without the traditional red velvet cape made by



In a prison, the Pope imitated Jesus' gesture with his Apostles in the Last Supper.

Gammarelli's tailors, and asked the community to pray for him. He showed his charisma and closeness towards the believers since the very beginning.

Francis has revolutionised the world by communicating with his words, transparency, good mood, closeness and symbolic acts. Furthermore, not only his words, but also his gestures and acts convey a message. He decided to call himself Francis, the Pope of the poor, and made very clear that he wanted a Church "poor and for the poor", and his acts do indeed legitimate his words: he does not live in a luxurious pontifical apartment, he eats in a common dining hall, he has washed the feet of young prisoners and young Muslim women, he does not wear a crucifix or a gold ring and he does not seat in the Popes' throne.

Surveys show Francis' acceptance levels worldwide. For instance, in his first year as Pope (2013), CNN revealed in a survey that 88% of the North American Catholics approved his management. Moreover, 75% of the citizens, regardless of their creed², also approved it. Two years after his appointment, the Pew Center published another survey showing that his popularity is increasing among the North Americans; the acceptance index of Pope Francis reaches 90% among the practicing Catholics³.

IDENTIFICATION, INCLUSION AND TRANSPARENCY

Francis looks like an ordinary man and distances himself from the ostentation, protocol and pomp that surround the important religious leaders. It is a powerful strategy to get close to the people. Furthermore, he uses a simple, direct and inclusive language that reaches the hearts of the believers. His messages are full of anecdotes, experiences and can be applied to everyday life. He rejected the strict, inquisitive and excluding discourses of some of his predecessors.

The success and popularity of Francis are due to his communication strategy, as he uses powerful tools to reach his audience:

identification, inclusion and transparency. When Francis speaks and acts, both believers and non believers identify with him: a common man who likes football, music and pasta; a man who does not judge and who has included the minorities, inviting them to be part of the Church. He is constantly speaking about

¹ El Mundo. «Las revoluciones del Papa Francisco.» (Pope Francis' revelations). El Mundo 13/04/2013. <http://www.elmundo.es/elmundo/2013/04/12/internacional/1365786824.html>

² CNN Poll: Pope's approval rating sky-high. 24/12/2013. http://religion.blogs.cnn.com/2013/12/24/cnn-poll-popes-approval-rating-sky-high/?hpt=hp_t2. <http://www.infobae.com/2013/12/24/1533046-francisco-alcanza-popularidad-record-estados-unidos-88>.

³ Infovicana. "Crece la popularidad del Papa en Estados Unidos" (The Pope's popularity increases in the United States). (09/03/2015). <http://www.infovicana.com/2015/03/09/crece-la-popularidad-del-papa-en-estados-unidos/>

his grandmother and conveys short and powerful messages. Their followers share them on social networks.

In 2013 he stated "If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge him?". Even if his messages will not necessary change the doctrine, the fact that the Church is now more open-minded with respect to the homosexuals, and the fact that it allows the divorced people to receive communion, brings once again thousands of people close to Catholicism.

Moreover, transparency and acknowledging the mistakes of the Catholic Church are two central issues of his discourse. Recently, Francis referred to the 15 diseases of the Church, which included vainglory, spiritual Alzheimer, worldliness and feeling immortal, among others. He also stated that "A curia that is outdated, sclerotic or indifferent to others is an ailing body." These messages contribute to restore the credibility of both the institution and its maximum authority.

FAR MORE THAN A RELIGIOUS LEADER

Bergoglio is nowadays one of the most influential leaders worldwide. In 2013, Pope Francis was named person of the year by Times magazine, which emphasized the crucial role of the Pontiff in changing the Catholic Church's perception among both its members and the general public. The prelate was considered more influential than other personalities such as Edward Snowden, who revealed the espionage program of the United States, president Barack Obama, the Iranian president Hasan Rouhani and the singer Miley Cyrus, among others. The selection was made based on influence and presence in the media in 2013⁴.

Moreover, the Argentinean Pope is more than a man who washes feet, hugs people who are ill, wears worn out shoes, loves the poor and generates controversy via his messages. Recently, it was known that the Pontiff contributed to the détente in relations between Cuba and the United States, acting as a mediator, and both President Obama and Raúl Castro deeply appreciated his intervention. This makes him much more than a religious leader.

"Francis has revolutionised the world by communicating with his words, transparency, good mood, closeness and symbolic acts"

The Pope also communicates thanks to his trips: they generate a closeness that would be unthinkable in another context. Since his election, Pope Francis has travelled seven times, celebrating crowded masses, giving speeches and meeting the main leaders worldwide.

He first travelled to Rio de Janeiro, where he participated in the World Youth Day. Almost a year after that, he travelled to the Holy Land: Jordan, Israel and Palestine. There, he visited the most important monuments of the region, such as the Wailing Wall, he planted a tree in the name of peace and met king Abdullah II, the Palestinian president Abu Mazen, and the Israeli president Shimon Peres. In these meetings and during his visit, he cried out for peace and for the harmony between

communities. These meetings show that he wants to get closer to Muslims and Jews.

After that, he visited South Korea to beatify 124 martyrs and asked the two Korean nations to seek peace. He took that same message to Albania. A month later, in France, he gave a speech to the Council of Europe, stating that "The royal road to peace – and to avoiding a repetition of what occurred in the two World Wars of the last century – is to see others not as enemies to be opposed but as brothers and sisters to be embraced. This entails an ongoing process which may never be considered fully completed." Finally, he also conveyed his peace message in Turkey, Philippines and Sri Lanka, as part of his pilgrimage and evangelisation mission.

This year, he will visit the United States and Cuba, as the relations between the two countries have been restored. Moreover, although there is no official confirmation yet, it is expected that he will visit Colombia in 2016 to convey a message of peace. Some say that it is a way of supporting the process that the government of president Juan Manuel Santos is undertaking with the FARC. The opposition believes that it is a way of demanding justice and recognition for the victims. It is not yet clear whether the Pope would come to Colombia. However, what is certain is that everything Pope Francis does is full of symbolism and strategic messages, and this hypothetical trip will not be an exception.

⁴ El País. «El papa Francisco es elegido "persona del año" por la revista 'Time'» (Pope Francis named person of the year by Time magazine) El País 11/12/2013. http://internacional.elpais.com/internacional/2013/12/11/actualidad/1386768082_907820.html



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