Fact Sheet: Pope Francis, Worldwide Social Media Phenomenon

Throughout the history of the Roman Catholic Church, Popes have often tried to have an international presence among their followers. This is no different when it comes to Pope Francis. He has made over 14 visits to countries around the world and continues to grow his worldwide presence though travel and media—particularly social media.

Previous Foreign Travel
Brazil (July 2013), Israel, Jordan, Palestine (May 2014), South Korea (Aug 2014), Albania (Sept 2014), France (Nov 2014), Turkey (Nov 2014), Sir Lanka, Philippines (Jan 2015), Bosnia and Herzegovina (June 2015), Bolivia, Ecuador, and Paraguay (July 2015), Cuba, United States (Sept 2015).

Pope and Social Media
- Other than making appearances around the world, Pope Francis has also drawn worldwide attention due to his presence on social media. His Twitter feed (@Pontifex) is currently followed by over 7 million people. This has helped build the Pope’s international presence, especially amongst young people and the digitally conscious.
- “I think that traditionally religion has used media very well,” explains Kimberly Eberhardt Casteline, Assistant Professor Communication and Media Studies at Fordham, and an expert in Religion and Media. “When we think back historically to the Protestant Reformation and the printing press, that was used by several religious organizations, new denominations in the Protestant church that use the printing press and the printed word to disseminate information. The Bible of course was printed in vernacular languages, which again spread the Protestant faith. Subsequently, religion really has taken advantage of every single technology from the telephone to the telegraph in the modern era to magazines and today, social media. Lots of religious
organizations are using social media. We know the Pope is very, very popular due to his Twitter account, and other organizations use it as well.”

- Casteline says the Pope has used media to reach out to the entire world, not just to his flock. “It’s not just Catholics who want to see the Pope, because of his status as a global celebrity,” says Casteline. “I know that he’s aware of that, just by the sheer number of his Twitter followers, so I’m sure he’s cognizant of keeping the message as one that can be heard by Catholics and non-Catholics alike.”

- The Poniff’s use of social media has allowed him to further his social aims. “I follow the Vatican’s Instagram account, and it presents a daily up-close image of Pope Francis, often his face, occasionally with someone else, communicating something about his humanity and connections with other people in a way that draws people in rather than excludes,” explains Brenna Moore, Associate Professor Theology at Fordham University.

- “Pope Francis has managed to make himself very popular, not only the most tweetable Pope, but someone who many New Yorkers are excited to see and I think that a lot of this has to do with the fact that he walks the walk, he doesn’t just talk the talk,” agrees Christiana Peppard, Assistant Professor of Theology at Fordham University. “You know, it’s refreshing for people to see a leader who embodies the ideas that he’s portraying.”

**Worldwide Phenomenon**

- Pope Francis has endeared himself to the public for looking out for the poor and radically shifting the church's focus to mercy rather than moralizing. “Pope Francis has returned to the humanistic style characteristic of the Second Vatican Council, keeping the message focused on people on the margins of society in a joyful, loving way that draws people in,” explains Moore. “So many of his actions are about connections beyond the Church walls.”

- Francis’ awareness when it comes to the environment is another reason why the world has grown so fond of Pope Francis, according to Peppard. “A lot of people are wondering if Pope Francis is extremely radical because he is talking about the environment, and I would say two things,” she explains. “One: he is, in a sense. He is linking environmental degradation and social problems; he links ecology and poverty. This is really important and it’s rare for someone
with a platform such as his to do. At the same time, he’s also building on the work of his predecessors.”

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