

Easter 7B

(Communications Sunday)

Sunday 13 May 2018

Pope Francis' Message for this year's World Communications Day presents us with the challenge of moving beyond "fake news" and working towards a Journalism of Truth. As Christians we must play our part in recognising and counteracting 'fake news' in the mass and social media.

One way of putting this to the test is asking ourselves do we have a reflex reaction to what we read in the news media or do we respond thoughtfully and objectively. Responding in a controlled way takes much more energy than reacting immediately, and yet most of us react instantly, for example, in e-mail 'conversations'. Reacting instantly does not allow us to ponder over what we have read or heard on the news or through social media, but expresses our 'gut reaction', often in a way we regret later on. These exchanges often play fast and loose with the truth, and have everything to do with letting the world know about our feelings. We are encouraged to think long and hard about things we and other people say through mainstream or social media, so as to allow reason and logic to take over so that our response to what we have heard or seen will be measured and not be overly coloured by our own prejudices, fears or emotions. Just imagine if there was a rule that we had to wait 24 hours before replying to an e-mail or a Tweet or a newspaper article. What's the betting that our language would be far more moderate and closer to the truth of the matter? This is what Pope Francis means by allowing "fake news" to give way to peaceful and accurate reporting or writing. Perhaps the best advice we can pass on is to take time when we read things that disturb us so we can make a calm and reasoned response.

One of the most insidious factors in the creation of "fake news" is repetition. Every day there are astounding examples of people simply repeating something they have read, without even thinking to check to see if it has any basis in fact? It is irresponsible to pass on information that we have not checked, because we can very often unwittingly be spreading a lie, and lies like that can do enormous damage to individuals and to institutions.

The Pope is right about moving beyond those "breaking news" headlines that float across our television screens, which give us the impression we know all we need to know - we don't! This year's message from the Holy Father challenges us all. Let us conclude with a prayer from Pope Francis:

Lord, make us instruments of your peace.
Help us to recognize the malice in 'fake news' that does not build communion.
Help us to remove the venom from our judgements.
Help us to speak about others as our brothers and sisters.
Where there is shouting, let us practise listening;
Where there is confusion, let us inspire harmony;
Where there is ambiguity, let us bring clarity;
Where there is exclusion, let us offer solidarity;
Where there is sensationalism, let us use sobriety;
Where there is superficiality, let us raise real questions;
Where there is prejudice, let us awaken trust;
Where there is hostility, let us bring respect;
Where there is falsehood, let us bring truth.
Amen.