

## Communications: A Feminine Noun in the Church of Francis

The Church, Pope Francis says repeatedly, is feminine and, just like the noun *communications*, it is declined by women believers in a thousand different ways. In this article, I will try to sketch out some of these ways as revealed in the Catholic Christian community of the Third Millennium. In some contexts, the voices of women are suppressed, defiled and hidden, but this does not mean that they are devoid of prophetic spirit. There are ways of communicating and proclaiming the Gospel that are exquisitely feminine because they are colored by tenderness, attention and sensitivity toward others. And also by *parresia* (frankness), through the deliberate use of straightforward language or even by a silence that nevertheless speaks eloquently.

Pope Francis often cites the exhortation of Francis of Assisi to his disciples: "Preach the Gospel continually, if necessary also through words" (Unofficial Rule, 1221 A.D.). And since Francis is indissolubly linked to Clare of Assisi, who liked to call herself his "little plant," I would like to begin with her and her sisters, the Poor Clares—still present throughout the world 700 years after the birth of their Institute—in delineating three points (a Decalogue would be too long for this article) regarding woman as a communicator of faith. In doing so, I will underscore the words of the Pope on this subject, drawn from the first two years of his pontificate.

### Keep your antennae always tuned

On 17 February 1958, Clare, the first woman in the history of the Church to draw up a rule of religious life, was proclaimed by Pope



Pius XII as the patroness of television and telecommunications. In an article dated 11 August 1993, the Feast of St. Clare, the Italian newspaper *Corriere della Sera* published an article by Aldo Grasso, who called Clare "the saint of *glastnost*, of transparency, as ubiquitous as the global village: the patroness of TV because she 'invented' live broadcasting." "Everyone knows that Francis of Assisi is the patron saint of Italy," the article continues, "but perhaps not everyone knows that Clare is the universal patroness of television (which gives her even greater territory to supervise). Why was she chosen as the patroness of this domain, when presumably her followers don't even watch television? Because the Church recognizes that this communications instrument possesses a feature peculiar to only a few saints: that of ubiquity—the ability to be present in two or more places at the same time. According to tradition, one Christmas Clare was sick in bed in her convent in Assisi, but in spite of this she saw the Mass that was being celebrated in church as if she were there and she also saw the nativity scene set up there."

Although restricted by illness and physical poverty, Clare discovered that she had the ability to "see beyond." The "antennae" of her soul were sensitive enough to pick up the movements of the Spirit, who blows where he wills. When I interviewed Sr. Diana Papa, Abbess of the Poor Clare Monastery in Otranto, for an article I was writing for the Italian weekly *Avvenire*, she followed in the footsteps of her Order's foundress, inviting everyone to "see God working in the human

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story through the beauty of the Incarnation. Living in the presence of God, we are called to be, day after day, women who 'meet' others and are close to them through unconditional self gift, forgiveness, mercy and tenderness."

### **Listen... so as to become a voice for others**

If we are to know what to communicate and the most effective way of doing this, we must first of all listen: to the situations around us, to the 'least' in society, to the Word, to the signs of the times. In a world in which people are drowning in the constant chatter generated by social networks and are perennially connected through the Internet, we should not take it for granted that it is easy to critically sift news and zero in on the information that is important, without becoming disoriented and overwhelmed by the media landslide.

It is not by chance that when Pope Francis received the members of the International Theological Commission last December, he highlighted in his address to them the fact that the group included "an increased presence of women—still not too many...they are the icing on the cake, but we need more!—a presence that becomes an invitation to reflect on the role that women can and should play in the field of theology.

"By virtue of their feminine genius," he continued, "women theologians can detect, to the benefit of all, certain unexplored aspects of the unfathomable mystery of Christ. Consequently, I invite you to derive the greatest benefit from this specific contribution of women to the understanding of the faith."

### **In Contact with the Problems of the Church and the People**

In the same speech, the Pope invited theologians to remain in contact with the problems of the Church and the people. In fact, he said, in order to communicate, we cannot cling to personal securities, or remain locked in an ivory tower or glued to a desk. We have to practice "neighborliness" in a concrete way. We have to take on "the odor of the sheep" and become experts at empathy.

As the late Polish journalist Ryszard Kapuscinski observed: "Cynics are not suited to this work." And Sr. Thecla Merlo, Co-Foundress of



the Daughters of St. Paul, said over and over again: "We must lend our feet to the Gospel"—a statement that is in complete harmony with the contemporary outlook on journalism, which affirms that in order to recount what is happening today, one must wear out shoe leather. This is not a rhetorical statement in a world that is more and more directed to the virtual—a world in which information is pieced together at a desk, using the "cut-and-paste" method. In this way, reality little by little comes to be perceived through intermediary devices—it is no longer something that touches or involves us personally. Instead of seeing victims of war, migrants drifting in shaky crafts on the open sea, or the poor in the heart of our cities, we see a collection of cold, recycled images.

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Maestra Thecla said, "I wish I had a thousand lives to dedicate to the Gospel." This brief statement admirably summarizes the thought that communication—and even more so the proclamation of the Gospel—involves "getting one's hand dirty" and that the desire to incarnate and share the Good News is imprinted on every Christian's DNA.

*We can no longer put off the challenge to study new criteria and ways to ensure that women do not feel like 'guests' but like fully-active participants in the life of society and of the Church, so that they will be able to make a more direct and incisive feminine contribution to these spheres (cf. Pope Francis, 7 February 2015).*

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