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GABRIEL BOUYS, AFP/GETTY IMAGES

# FIND FRANCIS IN YOUR FEED

Pope spreads word  
via social media,  
but not Facebook

**Matt Alderton**

Special for USA TODAY

**T**witter isn't exactly a "holy" place. Instead of psalms and Scripture, people typically go there for jocular observations from wisecracking comedians, vapid musings from minor celebrities and motivational memes from saccharine strangers. If they're in the mood for civil discourse, they might click a news headline or retweet a politician.

Generally, though, they're there to consume bite-sized bits of laughter, bombast and vanity, and to broadcast the same.

It might be the last place you'd expect to find a pope.

And yet, there he is. Just four days after his election to the papacy, Pope Francis — @Pontifex to the Twitterverse — sent his first tweet: "Dear friends, I thank you from my heart and I ask you to continue to pray for me. Pope Francis." Three years later, the Argentine pontiff has sent more than 900 tweets in nine languages, garnering more than 30 million followers.

The typical Twitter feed looks nothing like a Sunday sermon — and that's exactly why Francis wants to be there, according to

Michael O'Loughlin, national correspondent for the Catholic magazine *America* and author of *The Tweetable Pope: A Spiritual Revolution in 140 Characters*.

"Shortly after his election in 2013, Pope Francis was in Rio for World Youth Day. He encouraged the people gathered there to go back home and get out into the streets to meet people where they are," O'Loughlin says. "That statement has a lot of layers, both practically and theologically, but one of them is pretty direct: Go where people are. And for so many of us, that's on social media. That's how we communicate now. I think the pope recognizes that."

Clearly, he does: On Jan. 24, 2016, he called modern communications — including social media

**Passing by a poster of the pope in Rome, a pedestrian checks out Francis' Instagram account. He's @franciscus on Instagram, @Pontifex on Twitter.**





AFP/GETTY IMAGES

— “a gift of God which involves a great responsibility.”

“It is not technology which determines whether or not communication is authentic, but rather the human heart and our capacity to use wisely the means at our disposal,” Francis said in honor of World Communications Day, established 50 years ago by Pope Paul VI to draw attention to the “the vast and complex phenomenon of the modern means of social communication.”

“Access to digital networks entails a responsibility for our neighbor whom we do not see but who is nonetheless real and has a dignity which must be respected. The Internet can be used wisely to build a society which is healthy and open to sharing.”

While it's not a cat video or a

piece of celebrity shade, it's a message that resonates. And Francis is uniquely positioned to make it viral.

### SPIRITUAL 'SOUND BITES'

Credit for the Vatican's social media presence actually belongs to Francis' predecessor, Pope Benedict XVI, who launched the official @Pontifex Twitter account in December 2012. Although he resigned from the papacy less than three months later, his scant 39 tweets attracted an impressive 1.6 million followers.

Francis, however, has taken things to another level. “Pope Francis is someone who speaks very well in sound bites, and I

mean that as a compliment,” O'Loughlin says. “He says these short, staccato, yet thoughtful messages that stick with us, so it's very easy for him to cut through all the noise to get his message out. That makes him perfectly suited to social media — especially Twitter, where you're limited in what you can put out there for people to read and digest. The results for him have been phenomenal.”

So phenomenal that Francis recently expanded his social footprint, launching an Instagram account in March under the name @Franciscus, Latin for Francis. His images on the photo-sharing site already have garnered nearly 3 million followers.

“The reason people follow the social media accounts of celebri-

ties, or the president, or the pope is because they feel like there's a personal connection between them and this other person,” says Bryan Crable, a communications professor at Villanova University and founder of the school's Waterhouse Family Institute for the Study of Communication and Society, which has been sending students to Rome for semester-long internships at the Vatican since 2008. “Pope Francis is really adept at making people in large global communities feel like they have a real human connection with him.”

At 79, Francis himself is famously tech-shy. For him, however, it's the message, not the medium, that matters. “I think it's impor-

**Pope Francis' first tweet on March 17, 2013, asked for prayers. Francis has more than 30 million followers on Twitter; his English-language account has about 10 million.**

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## Presence has risks

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tant to know that while the pope doesn't use technology himself, that doesn't make him anti-technology," explains Jana Bennett, an associate professor of theological ethics at the University of Dayton. "He is interested in getting people to have a primary relationship with Jesus Christ, and he's willing to communicate that in any way he can."

### A DIGITAL DOWNSIDE?

His social-media savvy is helping the pope reach new audiences, including millennials and non-Catholics, with his message of mercy.

Some traditionalists, however, fear that social media will do the Catholic faith more harm than good.

"It's a double-edged sword for the Vatican and for Pope Francis because every thought he has now is amplified in ways it wasn't for other popes," O'Loughlin says. "As a result, some conservative Catholics are a little wary of his social media presence."

That wariness could explain the pope's absence from some social networks, such as Facebook, even as he flourishes on others. "The pope is on Twitter and Instagram because the Vatican ... thinks those platforms can be controlled a bit more easily," O'Loughlin says.

Twitter and Instagram, he says, lend themselves to broadcasting, while Facebook demands a more interactive approach. "I'm told the pope is open to having some sort of presence on Facebook, but it requires a lot more effort than (the Vatican) has time for right now."

Facebook's open nature makes

it especially problematic for institutions that are magnets for criticism. "The things that people post on the pope's Facebook page may not be things that everyone who has friended the pope wants to see," explains Crable, who says children following the pope on Facebook could be exposed to adult themes and profanity in posts' comments sections. "Are you opening the church up to ridicule? Are you opening the church up to conversations with people who aren't interested in dialogue — trolls who are only interested in saying mean things? That's the downside. If you're going to participate in these forums, you're going to have to have all kinds of conversations — not just the ones you want."

Although he's not on Facebook, Francis has decided that most social networks' rewards outweigh their risks.

"He's very aware that conversations on social media can be vitriolic and mean-spirited," Bennett says. "I think he's trying to set an example of how to use social media in a merciful way."

### DIVINE DOWNLOADS

The pope's example is resonating with Catholic organizations and individuals around the world.

Among those following it, for instance, is Catholic Extension, a Chicago-based fundraising organization that supports under-resourced dioceses across the country. In honor of Pope Francis' 2015 visit to the USA, it launched the "Flat Francis" social-media campaign, where Francis fans were encouraged to share photos of themselves with a cartoon pontiff downloaded from the organization's website. More than 5,000 people from all 50 states — including newsman Anderson Cooper and Catholic comedian Jim Gaffigan — did just that using the #flatfrancis hashtag.

"Catholic Extension is all about touching the lives of people in the poorest regions of the United States. We were looking for a way to connect to the 15 million Catholics in those areas and make the experience of Pope Francis coming to the United States real for them," says the Rev. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension. "Francis is somebody who ... reminds us that there's a joy deeper than all the challenges we're facing. His message is to 'encounter and engage,' and this was a very simple way of doing that."

The same ethos inspired mobile marketing firm Swyft Media to create a special "Pope Emoji" keyboard, also commemorating Francis' U.S. visit. Commissioned

by global Catholic network Ale-teia, and produced in partnership with social media consultancy Sports Media Challenge, the keyboard features tweetable and textable emoji and GIFs of Pope Francis doing things like heading a soccer ball, taking selfies with fans and visiting U.S. landmarks like the Liberty Bell.

"A picture truly is worth a thousand words," says Swyft co-founder and vice president Evan Wray, who notes that more than 158,000 users downloaded pope emoji and shared them more than 1 million times, resulting in 32 million interactions. "The (Pope Emoji keyboard) made it possible to bring the brand of the pope and the message of the pope into hundreds of thousands of people's daily conversations."

Whether digital conversations will put people in the pews remains to be seen. What's clear in the meantime is that the pope is talking — and more people than ever are listening.

"The pope wants to participate globally in conversations about what it means to be human, to be a steward of the environment, and to care for those who are poor or oppressed," Crable says. "Unless you're willing to be engaged in online communication, you're no longer going to be a part of those conversations."



SWYFT MEDIA

**Mobile marketing firm Swyft Media created special papal emoji in honor of the pope's visit to the USA last year. More than 150,000 people downloaded them.**