

The Twitter Campaigns of Donald Trump and Pope Francis Gabriel Moran

For the first time in U.S. history a presidential campaign is being staged under the powerful influence of Twitter. Even four years ago, Twitter was a minor player. This year it is one of Donald Trump's main instruments. All the commentators and pollsters are saying that Trump needs advertising money for television ads and a "ground game" of volunteers to knock on doors and deliver flyers. Trump seems convinced that he can win with three instruments: his cell phone to call talk shows, speeches at rallies that are covered on cable television, and his twitter account. The experts who say he cannot win that way are probably right. Nate Silver's "538" rates Trump's chances at only 21% which are good odds for Hilary Clinton. But that means there is still one chance in five that Trump could win.

Communicating via Twitter seems to be Trump's ideal form of delivering his message. Sentences with subjects, predicates, dependent clauses and proper antecedents are not obligatory. The 140 character limit seems well designed for rants, hyperbole, and insults. Trump saw the potential and mastered the form. Furthermore, twitter leaks back into other speech-making and conversations that quickly become shouting matches. A world in which Twitter is the model of human communication would undermine a politics of rational thinking and civil compromises.

Pope Francis burst upon the scene in 2013 when he was chosen to be leader of the more than one billion Roman Catholics. He immediately startled the world by talking in a way that no Pope has previously spoken. He delivers remarks that seem to be off the cuff, often in reaction to a reporter's question. The man who is supposedly the chief guardian of orthodoxy says things that appear to call into question main teachings of the official church.

The Pope does not actually perform on Twitter but his statements neatly fit into the space of a tweet and are quickly picked up in Twitter discussions. Pope Francis' preferred form of communication seems to be by a hand mic at the front of an airplane responding to reporters who toss out questions. Where the Pope differs in style from Trump is that he does not use his gnomic sayings for ranting and insulting people. His style of launching puzzling comments indicates what could be a positive use of Twitter to start a worldwide conversation.

The ambiguity inherent to this kind of communication causes conservative Catholics to go up the wall. Doesn't the Pope realize that the implications of what he is saying can upset centuries of fixed doctrine? The liberal left in the Catholic Church generally celebrates this seeming willingness to question everything or at least to convey an understanding attitude while leaving doctrines for later. Liberals, however, are likely to be disappointed when the Pope refuses to carry through on changes that he seems to imply.

One of the first comments of Pope Francis that caught public attention was a rhetorical question about gays: “Who am I to judge?” Later he said in response to a question: “If a person is gay and seeks God and has good will, who am I to judge?” Recently, Pope Francis said that the Church should apologize to gays (and a string of other people). That statement made headlines but it was silent about what is still the official teaching of the Catholic Church which in effect denies the existence of homosexuality (it is said to be a sinful tendency). “Who am I to judge?” does not address what rightfully bothers gay and lesbian people about Catholic Church teaching. The reaction on the Internet to the Pope’s call for apology was vitriolic.

The Pope’s twitter-like comments on women also draw immediate headlines and a few thanks but he does not go near the issue of women’s equality in the church. The *New York Times* of March 5, 2014 carried the startling headline that the Pope had said “women should have a greater presence in the church hierarchy.” That would mean either that he had changed the meaning of “hierarchy” or he had reconsidered his dismissal of the question of women priests. In fact, he was just calling for women to have more voice in the church. In June, 2016 he got headlines for seeming to advocate the ordination of women as deacons. But later it turned out he was only saying the question should be studied – which already had been done.

On the control of birth, the Catholic Church is in an indefensible position; the vast majority of Catholics do not accept the official teaching about “artificial” means. Pope Francis, in response to a question about his predecessor Pope Paul’s VI’s disastrous encyclical on the matter, said that a “deeper understanding” of that document is needed. He also said that there should be compassion for those Catholics who cannot follow the rules. More recently, he said that in the context of the Zika epidemic, contraceptives might be allowed because they are not an “absolute evil.” The headlines were that the Pope was changing church teaching on contraception but no such change is in sight.

Pope Francis has brilliantly used modern communication media to change the tone of how the Catholic Church presents itself. He has probably done as much as any one person could do in engaging not only Catholics but the secular world. His major documents provide material for Catholic study groups but leave most people who are not Catholic simply puzzled. When his 37,000 word document on the environment was published, the headline was that the Pope was joining the call for countering climate change. He could have said that in 140 characters.

It is not actually the Pope’s job to examine church teaching for inadequacies and errors; that work should be led by bishops, including the bishop of Rome, aided by theologians. The Pope has provided a few banners to march under but the hard work has to be done in a cooperative manner by experts on history, philosophy, and social science, as well as by ordinary Catholics who can testify to their experience. Whether or not Donald Trump needs a “ground game” to win the election, the Roman Catholic Church needs to involve great numbers of its members in rethinking the structure and official teaching of the Church. In the third paragraph of his recent letter on the family, Pope Francis made that point in less than 140 characters.

