

Communication Problems

One of the tragedies of the pandemic has been the damage done to the credibility of science and scientists. Clearly, part of the problem has been a series of self-inflicted wounds in the area of communicating with the public. For example, the CDC's announcement that vaccinated people could conduct their lives unmasked, and that there could be a return to the near-normal conduct of our lives seemed to come as an abrupt change from the dire messaging of only a month earlier. Indeed, at that earlier time the CDC director was almost in tears imploring the public to remain vigilant.

Add to these self-inflicted type of wounds to credibility, the propensity of the news media to distort, exaggerate and sensationalize scientific information in a way that introduces contradictions and confusion into the mind of citizens, and you have a recipe for the doubts we hear in public. But, is it the science which is at fault or is it a problem of communication?

Personally, I believe that Drs Fauci and Wolensky and the other scientists working on solutions to the pandemic are likely the best of the best in their fields. But, being a brilliant scientist doesn't make one brilliant at everything else. And, clearly, this group needed more assistance interfacing with the lay public. As it is, science isn't always perfect or precise: Often it is a matter of being on the "cutting edge" of knowledge as well as "educated guesses." Not to mention. It can be very difficult to communicate when subtle nuances are involved.

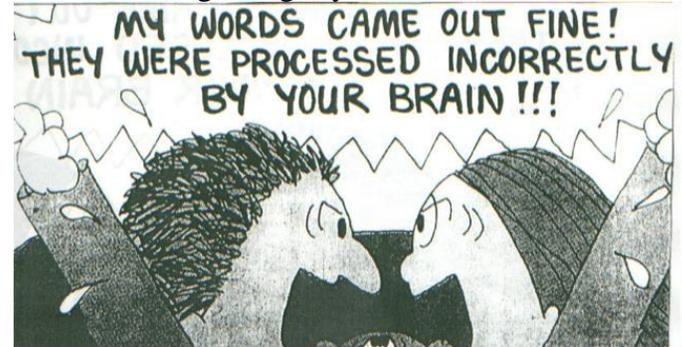
We have a similar problem with Pope Francis and those who assist him in communicating with the world via the modern media. By contrast to the two previous Popes, Francis does not seem to be careful or precise, and this has been, and continues to be, a source of confusion to people. This is especially so in regard to such controversial topics as homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, and other such hot button issues.

Previous Popes have been precise, perhaps to a fault. Benedict XVI was and is a very disciplined and precise theologian in his writing and speaking. By contrast, Pope Francis writes and speaks like "the man on the street." In some respect, I think that he has made it his task to counter the very doctrinaire approach of some Church leaders in an

attempt to make the Church more accessible to ordinary people.

When I consider what the Pope may be up to, I think of Jesus' sharp criticism of the scribes and Pharisees in Matthew 23 wherein he says that *"They tie up heavy burdens, hard to carry, and lay them on people's shoulders, but they will not lift a finger to move them."* This is suggestive of religious leaders who are proud of their mastery of doctrines and laws, and their abilities to make pronouncements on such matters. But, implicitly, they are not much concerned with helping people with the struggles of real life.

From what I have heard and read, Pope Francis is particularly irritated by this purely doctrinaire approach to matters. I do not think that he implicates his predecessors, but has in mind some of the leaders he encounters among bishops and clerics in the Roman curia. But, of course, I am speculating on such matters. The real point is that his response to the problem comes with its own set of problems; namely, the news media do with his clumsy words the same they do with those of scientists and doctors: They tend to take juicy sound-bites and magnify them for maximum controversy and reaction. After all, the media has devolved into either propagandists for preferred politicians or they have become more concerned with cultivating ratings by means of sensationalism.



Both the CDC and the Pope bear some responsibility for the poor communications which have plagued them. But, I think, if we really want to know what the scientists or the successor of St. Peter thinks, we have the ability to go to primary and authoritative sources. The CDC and the Vatican have their websites and publications. And, there are trustworthy, secondary sources to which we can appeal. Unfortunately, we cannot fully trust the popular media's version of things.