

Pope's media messenger excited by wide tent

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It seems Pope Francis is connecting with people of all faiths in a way that recent past popes have not. And, Basilian Father Tom Rosica, executive director of Salt + Light Media and the newly appointed English-language assistant to the Holy See press office, is witness to this.



“What strikes me is he has a handle on things,” Father Rosica said. “He is not a distant leader. He’s got a great sense of the situation, which means he is an excellent administrator. His pastoral skills are extraordinary. The human skills are amazing. And it’s the touch, the hugs, the compassion, the tears. It’s extraordinary what he is doing. He’s touching the world.”

Father Rosica was in New Orleans last week discussing with seven women religious congregations the best ways to use grant money through Loyola’s Institute for Ministry (LIM) for Salt + Light to highlight the rich charisms of each congregation and what consecrated life is today.

“The gift of religious life is a gift that needs to be told and shared,” Father Rosica said. He spoke frankly about Salt + Light’s evangelization ministry, which he founded in 2003, and about his frequent experiences with Pope Francis.

“I get on a plane, dressed in a Roman collar, and the stewardess comes over and says, ‘Your pope is really cute,’” Father Rosica said. “I get in a taxi in Toronto, and the Sikh taxi driver says, ‘What a pope.’”

“My Jewish friends ask me if it’s OK to consider him our pope, too? I tell them, ‘Yes, it’s fine.’ So, obviously, there’s something happening which is far beyond us. I am very aware of many people who have been on a shoestring and a prayer or on a lifeline to the Catholic faith and suddenly they are giving the church a chance. And, he’s touched many people.”

Father Rosica said people who come to him in confession said the example of Pope Francis brought them back.

“Obviously, the Lord is using this man,” Father Rosica said. “It’s really is a lesson for all of us – just when you have for plans for retirement (like Pope Francis did) and we want to wrap things up, his greatest work is being done now.”

Not exactly doing what he wanted

Father Rosica, who speaks seven languages, said his inspiration to become a priest came from excellent Sacred Heart Sisters and the Sisters of St. Joseph and the strong role Basilian priests played for him at a Basilian high school in Rochester and a college they started.

He was impressed by their “hard work, dedication and their genuine interest in young people. I owe much to their example.”

His goal as a priest was to be a high school French teacher, something he did for a few years. But God had other plans. He taught in the graduate school of theology at Canadian universities for 18 years (1990-2008), taking a year to chair the World Youth Day in Canada in 2002.

Then, in 2003, he was invited to be founding chief executive officer of Salt + Light Television, Canada's first national Catholic television network. He soon will end a three-year term as president of Assumption University in Windsor, Ontario.

"I've done nothing I wanted to do," he jokes. "Some people want everything mapped out for them. My line has been, 'Somebody else is writing my script.'"

Whatever he is doing, he makes sure to keep young people around him, something Pope John Paul II advised him to do at World Youth Day in Canada, knowing they would keep him young.

At World Youth Day, he had a staff of 400, of which 295 were young adults between the ages of 25-35, and they didn't let him down. He does the same at the television network, where he leads a staff of 35 people, all younger than he (he's 55).

"They must be in the front lines," he said. "That's been my modus operandi since I have been a priest."

Father Rosica became involved at the Vatican in 2008 when he was chosen as the English-speaking media attaché of the Synod of Bishops. In 2009, Pope Benedict appointed Father Rosica as a consultant to the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, and again in 2012 he was the English-speaking interpreter for the Synod of Bishops on the New Evangelization.

That led him in 2013 to the Holy See press office in Rome for about six or seven weeks during the papal transition as Father Lombardi's assistant for English-speaking reporters. Father Lombardi asked him to stay on to foster and develop the relationship with those journalists.

"One thing led to another, and now I relate to the (almost 800) English-language journalists in the name of the Vatican every morning to disseminate the text of the pope, help people to understand (the remarks) and, when necessary, when in Rome to do press conferences," he said.

Knows about religious

While he works with a variety of religious orders through Salt + Light, he met many others as part of apostolic visitation of women religious in December as one of three male visitors among 75 women.

"It was a wonderful experience to work with an incredible team and learn from the different communities in the United States," he said.

Father Rosica said he's learned something from each of his posts, but his main piece of wisdom has been to get the message out clearly and simply. He will use that advice as he creates videos of women religious congregations for the grant project through LIM.

Father Rosica told the nuns some dos and don'ts as they begin to gather information, photos, interview subjects and locations to tell their congregation's story.

"What we're going to try to do is bring out the best, and many times we can bring out things you didn't even know were there, you've taken them for granted," Father Rosica told the sisters. "So trust us, pray for us. This is a great honor for us to do and especially launching this in the consecrated life year."

Loves Pope Francis

Father Rosica said Pope Francis is “a brilliant communicator because he is a great pastor. I love Francis.”

“I’ve loved each of the popes, but there is something very moving about Francis,” he added. “There are two things about Francis. People are considering him to be this great revolutionary. The only revolutions he’s come to bring about are the revolutions of tenderness, which he speaks about in ‘Evangelii Gaudium,’ and the revolution of normalcy. What he’s doing is completely normal, and it’s quite outputting to some people.

“He’s a breath of fresh air, and he’s reaching the world. The world is listening, and we haven’t had this happen in quite a long time. Though some in the Catholic Church might have some question marks, the entire world is listening to and watching him. He is the most credible moral leader in the world.”

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