

Francis, 'cold-call pope,' touches a lot of people

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Of all the novelties that Pope Francis has brought to the Vatican, few have endeared him to the public—and unsettled his aides—as much as his penchant for picking up the phone and calling someone out of the blue.

The pontiff with the pastor's touch has phoned his cobbler in Argentina to inquire about a shoe repair, called to cancel his newspaper subscription and phoned a woman who was raped by a local police officer to counsel her.

Just recently, Francis phoned a pregnant Italian woman whose fiancé had pushed her to have an abortion.

Anna Romano instead dumped the guy, wrote to the pope about her problems, and on September 3 received a surprise call from the Holy Father, who offered encouragement and even said he would baptize the baby if she couldn't find a willing priest.

"Hello, Anna," the voice on the other end of the line said, "this is Pope Francis."

"I was petrified," the 35-year-old told *Il Messaggero*, a Rome daily. "I recognized his voice and I knew right away that it really was the pope."

On the other hand, two days in a row the Vatican also had to deny reports of papal phone calls that were either hoaxes or rumors.

On September 5, the Argentinian daily *Clarín*—usually well-informed on all things relating to Francis, the former archbishop of Buenos Aires—wrote that the pontiff had spoken by phone with Syrian president Bashar Assad as part of the Vatican's diplomatic effort to avoid a U.S. military strike against the country.

But, according to Federico Lombardi, a priest who is the Vatican spokesman, the news was “absolutely unfounded.”

Then on September 6, Lombardi had to refute a newspaper report that Francis had called a young gay man in France who had confessed his troubles as a gay Catholic in a letter to the pope. “I can deny with certainty that the pope has called a young man in France,” Lombardi said.

Speaking to Religion News Service, Lombardi said that as a matter of course he would not comment—nor confirm or deny the authenticity—about every person claiming to have heard the words “Hello, this is Pope Francis” when they answered the phone.

He said that instead he would intervene only when the alleged Francis calls touched on matters of “international relevance,” as in the case of Assad, or seemed to go against Catholic doctrine, as in the case of the French youth who asserted the pope had told him: “Your homosexuality doesn’t matter.”

“There is always the risk that people pretend to be the pope over the phone,” Lombardi told the French daily *Le Figaro* when asked about the story.

But that danger doesn’t seem to have dissuaded Francis—whose dialing habits have earned him the nickname “the cold-call pope”—from continuing to use his cell phone to reach beyond the walls of a Vatican that he feels can isolate him from his global flock.

This summer Francis called an Italian man who has struggled to forgive God after the murder of his brother, and the pope also phoned an Italian engineering student who wrote to him about his fears of not finding work even with his degree. The two “laughed and joked” for eight minutes, the teen said, and Francis told the young man to use the informal *tu* with him. —RNS

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