

**The Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network:
"some thirty, some sixty, and some even a hundred times"**

The Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network celebrates its 175th anniversary on June 28th and 29th, 2019, with more than 6000 people from 52 delegations around the world. For a year now it has been a Pontifical Work instituted by Pope Francis, recorded under the number 49 in the Vatican's register of legal entities. How did it happen that this ecclesial service —which in many parts of the world was gradually disappearing and was often seen as a black and white photo reminding us of the precious and ancient history of the mission of the Church— could be reborn today? Let us go back a little while.

January 20, 2019. Pope Francis, standing by the window where he prays the Angelus every Sunday, announced: "I would like to introduce you the official platform of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network: Click To Pray. I will include here the intentions and petitions of prayer for the mission of the Church." The World Youth Day (WYD) was about to begin and the Holy Father was inviting, specially the young, to download the Click To Pray application so they could join him in praying the Rosary for Peace. Many were hearing about Click To Pray for the first time. One may think that this was only a show of support to a prayer platform for the WYD of Panama. However, with this Angelus, it becomes the Holy Father's third existing social network. Along with Twitter (@Pontifex), and Instagram (@Franciscus), he now has his personal prayer profile on Click To Pray (Pope Francis).

Click To Pray was not an unknown digital platform in the Catholic Church — it existed alongside many others of high quality and with more history. It is the official platform of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network and it had its own history, built upon a digital community with more than a million users in six languages, at that time. In addition, it was already the official prayer platform of WYD Panama. However, when the Pope created his personal prayer profile, he gave Click To Pray a huge boost. News travel quickly around the world these days —on televisions, social networks and news programs that generally do not broadcast Catholic news. From Japan to Australia, from Gabon to South Africa, via India and the USA... not to mention many European and Latin American countries, such as Brazil. BBC World said: "Pope Francis has launched an app to encourage Catholics around the world to pray with him." In a few days, tens of thousands of young people were already using it, doubling its capacity and reaching more than 420,000 downloads and over 4 million prayers. It is difficult to measure how "fruitful" prayer can be, since it is always as invisible as the process of germination in the depths of the earth, that bears its fruit in due time. However, the impact cannot be denied. The technical challenges, which are posed by necessary adjustments the platform needs while it is working (App with Android and IOS website, blog, social networks, daily email), contrast with the tens of thousands of connections, making an evident impact worldwide.

Francis opening his prayer profile on Click To Pray was not surprising. How many times has he been heard to ask "Please pray for me!?" Francis believes in the power of prayer. He is a man of prayer, and his ministry can only be understood with and from this invisible but so essential standpoint: prayer. Prayer is essential to the mission of the Church and this is a conviction of the Holy Father. For this reason, for several years now, he has not only been promoting his Worldwide Prayer Network, but he is also sharing his monthly praying intention through The Pope Video. Francis knows very well that the fruitfulness of the Church's mission comes from prayer, from our personal relationship with the Lord. It is not the first time he speaks of this. Let us remember the Angelus in January 2017: "I would like to invite you to join the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network, which shares, also through social networks, the prayer intentions that I propose every month to the whole Church. This is how the Apostleship of Prayer works and how we all grow in communion."

From his words it is clear that the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network was not born with Francis. This service of the Church has existed for more than 175 years, under the name of the Apostleship of Prayer. But Francis has given his support to its re-foundation.

The Apostleship of Prayer comes a long way. It was born with the Jesuits in 1844, in France, as a response to participate in the mission of the Church in daily life. It quickly spread throughout the world. In 1861, Fr. Henri Ramière S.J. gave it a new dynamism, articulating it with the devotion of the Heart of Jesus within a missionary perspective. Soon after, Pope Leo XIII entrusted it with his prayer intentions. In time, it spread to more than one hundred countries and gained more than 50 million members promoting the Sacred Heart of Jesus. But after so many years, the Apostleship of Prayer started losing its strength and was gradually reduced to a set of "forms and languages" or to pious practices that were becoming an obstacle to communicate, to engage with new generations —the treasure that had been entrusted to it. In many countries this apostolate was falling apart and being reduced to elderly groups who, in spite of their love for the work, could not find a way to pass it along to younger generations. In 2009, Fr. Adolfo Nicolás S.J., Superior General of the Society of Jesus, decided he wanted to encourage a recreation process for this ecclesial service.

Thus a long process began, in which we are still immersed today. In the beginning, this recreation required many consultations, meetings, prayer and discernment, all within different cultures and languages, with all the misunderstandings that can be expected. It also took time to discern in depth and to discover —while being faithful to the beginnings— what was essential and original to our mission. These are long spiritual processes that do not depend on our strengths or capacities but on our availability to the Spirit of the Lord, for it is He who leads the way. This implies that we must try to offer as little resistance as possible to God's action. Besides, these are processes that can generate tensions and fears, since it is always difficult to understand continuity and novelty at the same time. Is not that what Jesus says when he speaks of the new cloth on the old garment? (Mk 2:21). As the Gospel shows us, there can be misunderstandings when the Spirit of the Lord does new things. But the Lord's wisdom has its own ways and it is He who is bringing about this re-founding.

Fr. Claudio Barriga S.J., delegate of the Superior General, led the first phase of the process with an international team, in which I participated. The work done there allowed us to present a document to Pope Francis for the recreation of the Apostleship of Prayer in 2014: "A journey with Jesus, with apostolic availability". This document was approved by the Holy Father. The second phase was centered on two main actions. On the one hand, helping the 98 national directors and coordinators, with their teams, to enter into the new intelligence of our mission. This required me to travel to more than 60 countries, since a spiritual process of this magnitude can only be initiated by personal encounter, and by listening to people from their different cultural, social and ecclesial contexts. On the other hand, we had to reorganize our worldwide network, which was at that time fragmented and with little synergy. We worked on the new name, common to the whole prayer network, its logo and its own brand manual. The question was then: What could be done to make known this spiritual treasure that had been entrusted to us? How could we facilitate the recreation of this ecclesial service?

The answer arrived with the Jubilee of Mercy. The moment was ideal. For pilgrims to receive the plenary indulgence they would have to pray for the Pope's prayer intentions. It was the occasion to put ourselves at service according to the new orientations of the recreation process and with new languages. In our pilot countries, France and Portugal, we had already entered into the digital world and the new social communications. It was not just a matter of communicating the same thing through a digital medium, but of incorporating a new understanding, new languages and new ways of relating to people —specially to young generations. The digital world was a new continent, and the recreation of this ecclesial service had to begin with it. We needed the help of a communications agency, because in this world, where the visual demand is very high, it is not enough to work with volunteers and people of goodwill —professionals are needed. I was not looking for just any professional. I asked the Lord in prayer to help us find qualified people with spiritual life and Catholic experience. And so I contacted an agency. They were young adults, several from Argentina, who after the election of Pope Francis had just started an agency to put the best of professional communication at the service of the Church's mission. That is how "The Pope Video" was born, and also Click To Pray.

In 4 years, The Pope Video has become the most sought video on the Vatican's social networks, with millions of views. From January 2016 until today it has more than 125 million views on our own networks and in 15 languages. It is a project that tries to speak a universal language and at the same time announces the Good News of Jesus Christ. In a divided and fragmented world, it is good that Christians, together with those who follow other religious traditions and with every person of goodwill, are mobilized by prayer and service for the common challenges of humanity and promote human brotherhood for peace. Pope Francis immediately gave his support to "The Pope Video" and has always been very

involved in its preparation and shooting. Francis is a man of relationships, of personal encounters, and I think that for this reason the video suits him very well. It is a simple and direct way to enter into a relationship with everyone, to speak from heart to heart.

We launched Click To Pray as an international project, in March 2016, together with the then Secretariat for Communications of the Vatican, now a Dicastery. There was already a Portuguese version initiated by our team in that country, and we had introduced the project to Pope Francis during the Centenary of the Eucharistic Youth Movement (EYM) in August 2015. The EYM, with more than 1,600,000 children and young people, is the youth branch of the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network. For this reason, Click To Pray was specially designed for young people and young adults, to help them pray for the mission of the Church, and in particular for the Pope's prayer intentions. This international project soon had a Spanish, English, French, German and Italian version. A Vietnamese version also was put forward, and one in traditional Chinese will soon follow. The video helps us get out of the "globalization of indifference" to open ourselves up to a culture of encounter, opening our hearts to others and to the world. Prayer appears thus as a form of solidarity and support. To corroborate this statement, it is enough to look at the number of people who participate in the "network prayer" section of Click To Pray, where everyone can put their personal prayer intentions and pray for others. A Salvadorian woman told me: "I want to thank Click To Pray because in 2017 we were living very difficult moments in my family, and I asked for help. Many people joined in our prayer, and in a communitarian way, without knowing each other, without speaking the same language. But we felt the strength of their prayers. Thank you for the community prayer that is heard by God and brings comfort to the brothers."

Today the Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network is a Pontifical Work constituted by the Holy Father in March 2018, with its legal headquarters in Vatican City. Its mission is to pray and live the challenges of humanity and the mission of the Church expressed in the Pope's prayer intentions. This is not possible without entering into the spiritual dynamic of the Heart of Jesus, which leads our hearts to be deeply united to Him in a mission of compassion for the world. This prayer network, especially at the parish and everyday level, is made up of hundreds of thousands of "invisibles." People who do not appear in the media but who by their generosity, deep faith, offering of life and by their prayer carry the mission of the Church forward.

Prayer is an invisible dimension of our life. It can often be forgotten because its fruits are not immediately evident. Like the seed in the ground it needs time... but its fruitfulness is immense, as the Gospel says: it produces sometimes thirty, sixty, and some even a hundred times as much as was planted. Prayer is essential for the Church's mission.

Fr. Frédéric Fornos S.J.
International Director
Pope's Worldwide Prayer Network