

'Hello, This Is Pope Francis'

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 this week, 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 Tuesday (Sept. 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 this week the Vatican also had to deny reports of papal phone calls that were either hoaxes or rumors.

On Thursday, 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 the Rev. Federico Lombardi, the Vatican spokesman, the news was was “absolutely unfounded.”

Then on Friday, 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.

In late August, the pontiff called an Argentine woman who had been raped.

This week's episode with Romano was typical: When she found out in June that she was pregnant, her fiance urged her to have an **abortion**. Then she learned that he was in fact married and already had a family of his own.

In July, Romano wrote in desperation to Francis, knowing that he sometimes responds personally to the thousands of people who write to him. On the envelope she put: "Holy Father Pope Francis, Vatican City, Rome." No ZIP code, nothing else. It was enough, apparently.

When her phone rang Tuesday, it was a local number that Romano did not recognize, but she answered anyway.

Recovering from the shock of hearing the pope's voice, Romano again told him how she felt "betrayed, humiliated." The pope, she said, spoke to her as informally as "a dear, old friend" would, and in their conversation Francis "reassured me, telling me that the baby was a gift from God, a sign of Providence. He told me I would not be left alone."

When Romano told the pope that she wanted to have the child baptized but was afraid she could not because she is divorced and on her own, the pope told her he was sure that she could find a willing pastor.

"But if not," Francis reportedly added, "you know there's always me."

Though she doesn't know whether she will have a girl or a boy, Romano told the newspaper she thinks it's a boy, and it's clear what she will name him: "Francis."