

Buffalo's blogging bishop

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Bishop R. William Franklin, the lifelong theologian and esteemed academic who was installed as the 11th Episcopal bishop of Western New York last spring, has 894 Facebook friends.

"That's a pretty good number," says the jovial Franklin during an interview at the diocese's Tonawanda offices. "My children say that I have more Facebook friends than they do."

But Facebook is just one of the modern media that Franklin uses to communicate with his flock. His personal website, rwilliamfranklin.org, includes links to email for comments, questions or prayer requests. Franklin writes longer pieces and appears in video chats on a popular blog, jerusalem-crossing.com, named for the Jerusalem Cross he has chosen as his bishop's cross.

And, just for fun, Franklin is also the star of an award-winning short film titled "Stair Dance," made when he was associate director of the American Academy in Rome to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the academy's main staircase.

Comments on the YouTube video of "Stair Dance," which has been watched by more than 3,380 people, include, "I still can't believe that, that is my bishop!!!!!" "Go Bishop! LOL," and "I think the whole Episcopal diocese of WNY has seen this ... hahahaha!"

To Franklin, who just turned 65, the modern methods of interaction are just new ways to do the job of a bishop: to communicate with his flock, offering "a message of welcome, acceptance, growth, hope and the gospel of Jesus."

His academic credentials are extensive and impressive. After earning a doctoral degree in church history from Harvard, he spent 19 years on the faculty of St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn., and five years at the General Theological Seminary in New York City. He was dean and president of Berkeley Divinity School at Yale University from 1998 to 2002.

Ordained a priest in 2005, Franklin then spent five years as assistant director at the American Academy in Rome, where his wife, Carmela Virchillo Franklin, a classics professor at Columbia University, was director. In Rome, Franklin was also associate rector of St. Paul's Church, and an academic fellow at the Anglican Centre. Before his election in Buffalo, he was senior associate priest at St. Mark's in Philadelphia. He was consecrated bishop of the Diocese of Western New York on April 30, 2011.

Despite his degrees and extensive studies, Franklin seeks a down-to-earth approach to ministering.

"My mission has been to break out of the academic environment and connect the richness of scholarship to people's needs," says Franklin. And in this he sees ancient inspiration. "Jesus used the latest methods of communication, he talked to people, he was on the road, he was constantly trying to spread his message. I'm very inspired by Jesus' model."

Franklin lauds what he calls "this wonderful new media," which allows him to communicate his message in a dynamic way. "My personality, my various interests, all these things can be translated better through these new media than just in a book," he says.

Franklin's tech-savvy assistant is Laurie Wozniak, communication officer of the Episcopal Diocese of Western New York. When she met him during the 2010 "walkabout" visits held to allow parishioners and clergy to get to know the final four candidates for bishop, Wozniak says, "I could hear this future orientation. He was the oldest candidate of the four, and yet he was very forward-looking."

In fact, at their first meeting after he was elected bishop, Wozniak recalls saying to Franklin, "I think you need to blog, because as a new bishop people want to get to know you quickly." Even with a concerted effort to visit each of the 60 worship communities spread over seven counties, "realistically, he is going to get to every church maybe once a year," says Wozniak.

Franklin adds, "I immediately said yes, this is exactly what I want to do."

Franklin posts about twice a month to his blog. "Sometimes it's text, sometimes it's video, sometimes it's a combination of both" all designed by Wozniak, Franklin says, who "makes it beautiful."

While his blog posts include interesting and amusing anecdotes, such as his grandmother's civil rights activism in rural Mississippi in the 1950s and his adventures in driving, which indicate that the bishop may have a bit of a lead foot, he always returns to his main themes.

The blog, he says, "allows me to share the message of the gospel of Jesus, welcoming people and giving people hope. I can flesh that out in a way that's very accessible to people. I am trying to give people a hopeful message so that our church can also be an institution of hope to Western New York, through welcoming people warmly. I think this warm welcome is made even more possible through warm welcoming media."

The blog has more than 150 subscribers, and gets many more hits when Franklin writes a new post or Wozniak sends out an email blast. "I am totally blown away by how many people are reading" the blog, Franklin says. Readers are located across the country and the world, as well as in the diocese.

The out-of-town audience is made up of "people who want to keep up with what we're doing; we like that," says Franklin. "Although we are very focused on our region, we hope that other parts of the country can look toward us for leadership, because what we are facing in Western New York, other parts of the country are facing as well."

Franklin sees the blog as a forum for teaching. "The blog has been a godsend because the bishop is supposed to be a teacher," he says. "A lot of my life has been spent as a teacher, and I love teaching. The blog has allowed me to engage in that teaching role and reach people all over the diocese."

Franklin says email "is very important to my ministry too," and calls it "sort of my shepherd's crook, because when I am away from email, I really do feel cut off from the community." When he visits New York City to spend time with

his wife, who usually returns to Buffalo every other weekend, he brings a laptop and checks his email. "I hate to admit this, but even on my days off, if a question comes up, I answer it," he says. "I think these new media enhance the role of a bishop so much. If you are there to build community, to be of service to our people, the media allow that to happen."

Although he hadn't lived here before, Franklin has strong ties to Buffalo through his wife's family. In the 1970s, Carmela Vircillo Franklin's sister, Sabrina, married Robert Franke of Buffalo. After Vircillo Franklin's father retired in 1986, her parents, Joseph and Catarina Vircillo, moved to North Buffalo to be near their daughter and her family.

"Because they were here, we would come here almost every Christmas," says Franklin. "I got to know the cathedral and the city extremely well, and I loved the city, which is partly why I felt a call to this job."

Oddly, when the Franklin family, which includes daughters Corinna, 31, and Beatrice, 24, moved to Rome in 2005, Franklin chose to send his books and half of the family's furniture to be stored in Buffalo. "When I was elected bishop, I realized, 'They don't have to move a lot of things.' Isn't that strange?" he asks.

The Franklins bought a home on Bryant Street between Elmwood and Delaware. "We wanted to live in the city, to show our attachment and commitment to the City of Buffalo by living right in the heart of the city, and we love it," says Franklin.

In Rome, Franklin became the unlikely star of the video "Stair Dance." On his blog, he explains that his daughter Beatrice had friends who wanted to enter a contest held to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the main staircase at the American Academy. Franklin writes, "They said, 'Beatrice, your dad is the least likely person people we know to make a music video, so would he do it?' A daughter's powers of persuasion are great, and she said to me, 'You know you like to have fun, so will you do this for me and my friends?' and so I did this, and this video has had thousands of hits on YouTube, and at almost every visitation, I find young people who have watched my video."

The video, set to the vintage Italian tune "Cuore Amato," starts with Franklin in an elevator, first glaring at a book in exasperation and then tearing pages out and dropping them to the floor. He begins to bob in time to the music, and as the door opens, he begins to dance, runs down a hall and then gracefully dances down the open marble staircase. Some of his steps and poses evoke John Travolta's disco moves in "Saturday Night Fever" and Christopher Walken's hotel escalator dance in Fatboy Slim's "Weapon of Choice" video.

The video creators -- Luca Nostri, Nick Barberio and Meena Hasan -- showed clips of Travolta and Walken to Franklin, and "told me every move to make," says Franklin. When his wife, Carmela, entered the building at the end of the shoot, the crew kept filming and incorporated her into the video, too.

The video won first prize in the competition to commemorate the staircase.

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