

ITALY

Pope's video at music festival highlights Vatican's communication failure

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Pope Francis' appearance at the Sanremo Music Festival, two days ago, is in danger of turning sour. The bombshell was dropped yesterday by *Dagospia* (an Italian news website), which revealed alleged background information according to which the video

with Pope Francis broadcast on the opening night of the 2025 Festival has nothing to do with the singing event, since it was filmed in May 2024 as a thank you to the artists who took part in the World Children's Day, which was hosted by Carlo Conti and who happens to be hosting Sanremo.

The Pope, according to Roberto D'Agostino's website, only discovered yesterday that he had featured on the festival's programme and was not happy about it. The matter came up during the daily press conference in Sanremo, in response to a question from Giuseppe Candela, a journalist from *Dagospia*, to which Conti replied that the video had arrived on 1 February, following his request on 12 January mentioning the planned performance of the Israeli singer Noa with her Palestinian colleague Mira Awad. A rather credible version. The Tuscan presenter specified that the intermediary was Father Enzo Fortunato, former coordinator of Universal Children's Day, well known for his television appearances and social activities.

Dagospia, referring to the Franciscan friar who had been appointed director of communications for St Peter's, wrote: 'Two days ago the spry Enzo Fortunato resigned as head of St Peter's communications office: could it be because he is entangled in the papal farce of Sanremo?' The *Daily Compass* notes, however, the friar's resignation as head of communications for the papal basilica had actually been announced at least a week earlier. A few days ago, Cardinal Mauro Gambetti, Archpriest of St Peter's, made the announcement privately in the Basilica, citing incompatibility with his recent appointment as President of the Pontifical Committee for the World Day of Children and announcing that he had taken on the role of interim Director of Communications. While the news of his appointment as Director of Communications was prominently announced in January 2024 and included in the bulletin of the Holy See Press Office, the news of his resignation remained "frozen" for several days.

But more than Sanremo, what weighed heavily on the decision was the uproar caused by videos showing a vandal climbing on the main altar and destroying six precious antique candelabras before finally being stopped by Vatican security guards. It seems that announcing Father Fortunato's resignation a few hours after this episode, when his media management had already been criticised by *Silere non possum*, (an Italian website that provides information on the Church and the Vatican), could easily have led to a correlation between the two news items and put Gambetti in a difficult position. In the meantime, however, the Sanremo case broke and *Dagospia* made the connection with the resignation, which has now been officially confirmed.

According to the *Daily Compass*, the decision to leave the Basilica's communications

department had been in the making for some time: the Franciscan's activism has not been well received in the Vatican, and his recent appointment as president of the Pontifical Committee for World Children's Day would have made it preferable not to combine too many roles. Therefore, the less exclusive one was sacrificed, also in view of the existing congestion in the Vatican communications office.

The latter, however, seems to be the real defeat in the Sanremo case. If it is difficult to believe that the Pope - and this Pope in particular - could end up, without his knowledge, as the protagonist of the most-watched television programme in Italy, it is easier to believe that it was the Holy See's impressive communications machine that was unaware of it. In fact, since the case broke yesterday, the press office has not, at least at the time of writing this article, provided any clarification on the actual recording or purpose of the video. The only one to speak about it was Carlo Conti - the most innocent and indeed 'victim' of the usual communicative short-circuits from across the Tiber - who explained that he had kept the secret even from his wife.

During the last twelve years, Francesco has us all used to not paying too much attention to the filters and his being available to the media through the privileged interlocutor of the moment. In any case, *Dagospia's* background story had the merit of making people talk about the Pope's presence in Sanremo, since the content of the single video message did not arouse the same interest as the singing performances or the artists' appearances. The fact that the Pope's appearance came so close to another interview the Pope gave on a popular Italian television programme with Fabio Fazio three weeks ago hasn't helped. If excessive media coverage of the Pope is someone's communication strategy, perhaps it's time to rethink its effectiveness.