

# In Internet age, church cannot avoid debate, Vatican spokesman says

VATICAN CITY – Recent Vatican communications controversies have shown that in the Internet age the church cannot avoid debate and in fact must be prepared to explain its teachings more convincingly through new media, the Vatican's spokesman said.

"In a world such as ours, we would be deluding ourselves if we thought that communication can always be carefully controlled, or that it can always be conducted smoothly and as a matter of course," the spokesman, Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, said in a lecture May 18 at the Westminster seminary in London.

Father Lombardi said that, like any great institution today, the Catholic Church is going to come in for frequent criticism. Thanks in large part to the Internet, the "chorus of voices" that takes part in such debates is larger and more diverse, he said.

The church's strategy should be to enunciate its positions, evaluate criticism, and then give a clearer and more penetrating response, he said.

"It is a mistake to think that we ought to avoid debate. We must always seek to conduct debate in a way that leads to a better understanding of the church's position – and we must never get discouraged," he said.

Father Lombardi cited three of Pope Benedict XVI's actions that have drawn what he called "sensational" media-driven criticism: his speech on Islam in Regensburg, Germany, in 2006; his lifting of the excommunication of Bishop Richard Williamson, who had denied the extent of the Holocaust; and his more recent comment that condom distribution is not an effective way to stop the spread of AIDS.

The Vatican spokesman said that in each case the criticism had provoked some "real hard thinking" and additional Vatican responses. Although these responses arrived

rather late, he said, they were serious, penetrating and well-argued, and in the end enriched the public discussion.

As a result, he said, the question of Christian-Muslim relations has been addressed more frankly; the positions of the pope on the Holocaust are more widely known and Catholic-Jewish relations have been strengthened; and the debate over condoms is leading to better understanding about truly effective AIDS prevention.

Father Lombardi said it's inevitable that the church's message will sometimes be misunderstood, distorted or rejected by an increasingly secular world.

"We cannot fool ourselves into thinking that a perfect communications strategy could ever make it possible for us to communicate every message the church has to offer in a way that avoids contradiction and conflict," he said.

"Truth be told, success in this sense would be a bad sign – at the very least, it would indicate ambiguity or compromise, rather than authentic communication," he said. The courage to speak the truth and "not to become enslaved to the desire for approval" means the church will often go against the grain of society, he said.

Father Lombardi said the Internet and other new media tools have risks and "enormous potential for manipulation and moral corruption." But he said the church cannot ignore the great potential of online media if it wants to "keep the truths of the faith in close touch with the emerging culture and the younger, growing generations."

One of the challenges of the Internet is that it can destroy or confuse the hierarchy of information-providing that church agencies have worked so hard to set up, he said. Another huge challenge is interactivity, a complex task that requires an enormous commitment of resources, he said.

"Being able to receive comments is not enough: We need to develop a structural capacity to respond clearly and competently to the questions that arise – and that takes manpower, time and money," he said.

At the same time, he said, Catholic communicators cannot ignore "old media," because many less developed countries around the world still rely on traditional

technologies.

The Vatican spokesman said the task of Catholic communicators is to keep working harder to develop and use new media to communicate the Gospel and promote a culture of dialogue. If successful, he said, the church can one day say that “the Internet is truly blessed.”