

Language lessons: New media test Vatican's digital fluency

VATICAN CITY - Pope Benedict XVI recently urged the world's priests to make better use of new media, but in his own backyard the digital revolution is still seen as a mixed blessing.

The Vatican Web site remains largely a repository of printed texts, displayed on pages designed to look like parchment. And despite more than a decade of discussion about making the site interactive, www.vatican.va continues to provide information in one direction only: from them to you.

Some Vatican agencies have embraced the digital possibilities, notably Vatican Radio, which offers online broadcasts, podcasts and RSS feeds along with photos and print versions of major stories.

Other departments prefer to fly below the radar. The Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, for example, has posted exactly one new piece of information on its Web page over the last three years.

The impression that the Vatican is slow on the draw when it comes to Internet possibilities was confirmed recently when a "Vatican" Twitter feed turned out to be someone impersonating the Vatican. It was a fairly innocent case of Twitterjacking, but begged the question: Why doesn't the Vatican have a real Twitter feed?

Among the few Vatican officials willing to tackle these issues head-on is Archbishop Claudio Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications. He met with reporters to present the pope's World Communications Day message Jan. 23, which called for better use of new media, and said it held lessons for everyone engaged in church ministry.

"The risk is that our sites will merely be places where information is posted, and not a real meeting ground," he said.

Archbishop Celli has helped prod the Vatican toward more interactivity. Last year,

his council designed and launched a special Vatican Web site, www.pope2you.net, to bring the pope closer to a younger audience. It includes iPhone and Facebook applications, and visitors have used the site to send nearly 300,000 e-cards to their friends, each bearing a snippet of Pope Benedict's teaching.

Last Christmas, pope2you.net invited people to send personal photo-and-text Christmas greetings to the pope, which were then posted to a linked Flickr account. The response was overwhelming, with messages from believers and nonbelievers all over the world. In January, Archbishop Celli was busy putting together a representative selection in dossier form for the pope.

When the pope released his communications day message urging priests to take advantage of digital media, Archbishop Celli did something that reversed the usual hierarchy of communication in the church: His site encouraged young people, after reading the papal message, to clicking on a link and send it directly to their pastors.

Archbishop Celli, a 68-year-old Italian who has spent his entire career in the Roman Curia, knows that communication novelties are usually introduced very gently at the Vatican. He readily concedes that at his age, when it comes to new media he may be part of the problem.

"We have our own digital divide. I think of myself. I was not born 'digital'. I belong to a certain era that feels more at home with a book," he told reporters. He said, for example, that he was amazed at the Kindle but found it hard to imagine himself "sitting in a chair and watching the pages of a book stream past on a small screen."

The challenge for the church is not to encourage young priests and seminarians to use digital media, because they're already doing so, he said. The bigger problem is convincing middle-aged and older priests to embrace these possibilities.

Archbishop Celli said his council is also willing to tackle an even more sensitive issue - in many ways, the core issue - of Vatican communications: the question of language.

"This is a topic we need to face in an explicit manner. Many times we speak, but in a language that is no longer comprehensible," he said. He said that's something that

may be the focus of an upcoming plenary session of his council.

Speaking the language of new media is a delicate issue precisely because many Vatican officials do not trust these media to get it right about the church, or to engage people at a more than shallow level. They doubt whether the language of the Internet is compatible with the beauty and depth of Catholic theology and liturgy.

Monsignor Paul Tighe, secretary of the communications council, launched what might be called a trial balloon on the question of language in a recent article in *Cultures and Faith*, a publication of the Pontifical Council for Culture.

While acknowledging the risks of superficiality, he said people should remember that the language of the digital culture would not substitute for dogma or theology, but would be employed primarily to make an initial point of contact with those who are far from the faith.

As things stand, he said, the church relies too much on texts, which often use a vocabulary and forms of expression that are experienced as “unintelligible and off-putting even by sympathetic audiences.”

He said the church needs to recognize that today’s younger audience is fluent in “a language rooted in the convergence of text, sound and images,” and will quickly move on if their attention is not immediately engaged.

Monsignor Tighe said that, ultimately, the church should look to the example of Christ, who spoke to his contemporaries with words, stories and parables, as well as deeds and actions. The church can also turn to its rich heritage of art and music, he said.

“Just as the stained-glass images of medieval cathedrals spoke to an illiterate audience, we must find forms of expression that are appropriate to a generation that has been described as ‘post-literate,’ ” he said.