

# MySpace, Facebook users at Vatican hit firewalls

VATICAN CITY – Vatican employees are now banned from accessing some social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace while at work.

People trying to poke a friend or post a status update on their Facebook page from a computer connected to the Vatican network will instead hit a powerful firewall that says the requested page cannot be viewed because it does not fulfill the network's "access protection criteria."

The Vatican spokesman said the move is a "normal and prudent" measure that reflects similar strategies taken by other companies around the world that have blocked employee usage of social networking sites on office networks.

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, the spokesman, told Catholic News Service June 16 that "there is nothing surprising" about the new ban.

Like many employers, the Vatican has long had firewalls installed on its network to block access to pornography, online gambling, and, according to the firewall warning page itself, any site that contains "inappropriate material."

Some Vatican employees noticed in late May that social networking sites like Facebook and MySpace were now being blocked. Other information sharing sites like Twitter, YouTube and Flickr were still accessible as of June 16.

Monsignor Paul Tighe, secretary of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, told CNS June 16 that the ban on social networking sites on an office computer network "is a fairly normal and prudential measure."

His office has been strongly encouraging the church to get more involved in using new digital media. It unveiled a new "Pope2you" Facebook application in May which lets people send and receive "virtual postcards" of the pope along with inspiring text culled from his various speeches and messages.

Pope Benedict XVI has urged everyone, especially young people, to use the new media in positive ways.

When asked why the Vatican would institute the bans after it has been promoting these new forms of communication, Father Lombardi said the two things were not related.

Extending the firewall to include some social networking sites "is a rule concerning the internal use of work-related equipment in the office," he said.

Monsignor Tighe said he believed online social networking is more appropriate from home and not the office.

Some Vatican employees said they were amused or outright angered by the Facebook ban.

One employee who asked not to be named said, "It's understandable that people who grew up without computers would be upset that people are using (these social networking sites) on work time, but Facebook has replaced e-mail and has become a major news source."

The Vatican employee said a ban on Facebook makes it much harder to keep in contact with individuals and issues that are intricately tied to their work. Also, when phone lines are down in Italy or in a country they are trying to call, Facebook is the way they can get in contact, the employee told CNS.

Banning Facebook indicates a lack of knowledge about how the Internet functions and how it can be a valuable work tool, the employee said.

For example, Facebook users immediately posted news that in an interview aired Jan. 21 traditionalist Bishop Richard Williamson of the Society of St. Pius X had claimed that reports about the Holocaust were exaggerated and that no Jews died in Nazi gas chambers.

One Vatican employee said he read about the interview on his Facebook newsfeed Jan. 22, two days before the Vatican made public Pope Benedict's decree to lift the excommunication of Bishop Williamson and three other bishops.

“If Vatican cardinals had had their Facebook newsfeed going, they could have nipped that one in the bud,” he said, referring to the controversy that erupted about why the Vatican would go forward with lifting an excommunication after the bishop’s objectionable comments had been televised.

“Given the Vatican’s foul-up with communication in the past, (the online networking ban) shows they haven’t learned their lesson,” the employee said.