

Pope asks priests to get online, spread the Gospel

VATICAN CITY – In a message embracing the evangelizing potential of digital media, Pope Benedict XVI asked priests around the world to use Web sites, videos and blogs as tools of pastoral ministry.

“The world of digital communication, with its almost limitless expressive capacity, makes us appreciate all the more St. Paul’s exclamation: ‘Woe to me if I do not preach the Gospel,’ ” the pope said in his message for the 2010 celebration of World Communications Day.

“Priests stand at the threshold of a new era: as new technologies create deeper forms of relationship across greater distances, they are called to respond pastorally by putting the media ever more effectively at the service of the Word,” he said.

The pope’s message, released at the Vatican Jan. 23, was tailored to the current Year for Priests, focusing on the theme: “The priest and pastoral ministry in a digital world: New media at the service of the Word.” World Communications Day will be celebrated May 16 in most dioceses.

The pope said that while priests should not abandon traditional methods of pastoral interaction, they cannot afford to pass up the opportunities offered by digital media. He said “the recent, explosive growth and greater social impact of these media make them all the more important for a fruitful priestly ministry.”

For priests to exercise their proper role as leaders in communities, they must learn to express themselves in the “digital marketplace,” the pope said.

“Priests are thus challenged to proclaim the Gospel by employing the latest generation of audiovisual resources (images, videos, animated features, blogs, Web sites) which, alongside traditional means, can open up broad new vistas for dialogue, evangelization and catechesis,” he said.

The pope emphasized, however, that the church’s role is not simply to fill up space

on the Web. Its overriding aim is to express in the digital world “God’s loving care for people in Christ,” not just as an artifact from the past or a theory, but as something concrete and engaging, he said.

Because digital media cross over religious and cultural boundaries, the church’s presence requires sensitivity “to those who do not believe, the disheartened and those who have a deep, unarticulated desire for enduring truth and the absolute,” he said.

In order for priests to effectively use new media, formation programs should teach them how to use these technologies in a competent and appropriate way, the papal message said. This formation in digital media should be guided by sound theology and priestly spirituality, it said.

“Priests present in the world of digital communications should be less notable for their media savvy than for their priestly heart, their closeness to Christ,” the pope said. In this way, they help give a “soul” to the Web, he added.

Archbishop Claudio Celli, president of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, said the message once again illustrated the pope’s mainly favorable view of new media.

“The pope is aware of the limits of new technologies, but he wants to make the point that these new means of communication play a positive role, both in the wider society and in the church,” the archbishop said in a briefing with reporters.

Archbishop Celli said the message doesn’t mean that the Vatican now expects every priest to open a blog or a Web site, but rather to make appropriate use as possibilities present themselves. He said that task will probably be easier for younger priests, who are already more involved in new media.