

Pope, Catholic media workers strategize

VATICAN CITY - Taking advantage of new media to spread the Gospel, the Catholic Church also has an obligation to point out areas where the media has a harmful effect, especially on children, Pope Benedict XVI said.

The pope called on media operators “to safeguard the common good, to uphold the truth, to protect individual human dignity and promote respect for the needs of the family.”

Meeting March 9 with members of the Pontifical Council for Social Communications, Pope Benedict spoke of the benefits of greater access to quality entertainment, information and educational opportunities through the media.

But he also expressed concern about the “increasing concentration” of the media in the hands of a few multinational conglomerates and said that “much of what is transmitted in various forms to the homes of millions of families around the world is destructive.”

Strategies for using new technology to communicate the Gospel message and for counteracting the negative impact of the media dominated the council’s March 5-9 meeting at the Vatican.

U.S. Archbishop John P. Foley, council president, told members that the church must fulfill its responsibility to share with all people “the message of their origin in God, their destiny with him in heaven and their redemption in Jesus Christ.”

The problem, he said, is that the message of salvation “must compete with thousands of other messages - messages that perhaps appear immediately more appealing or more tempting.”

U.S. Sister Judith Zoebelein, a Franciscan Sister of the Eucharist who works in the Vatican’s Internet office, said the church must expand its presence on the Internet. But it must do so in a way that helps lead people from a “virtual” experience of faith

and community to a personal encounter with the Lord and participation in a parish, she said.

The Vatican's Web site has helped people who were already part of a real community connect in a virtual community with the Vatican, accessing documents and even sending e-mail greetings to the pope, she said.

The next step must be using the Internet to reach those who are not part of any concrete community, she said.

In an attempt to ensure that an Internet search of things Catholic leads to finding a real experience of the church, Sister Judith said, the Vatican's Internet office is running a trial e-learning site.

"Perhaps the biggest reason for choosing e-learning is that young adults today live and learn on the Internet more than any other particular place," she told the council.

The topic chosen for the first course was the meaning of suffering, using Pope John Paul II's 1984 apostolic letter along with "photos, music, images, questions and additional reflections," she said.

But unlike most Internet courses, the Vatican proposal includes regularly scheduled face-to-face meetings of participants.

"The anonymity of the Internet must at some point lead to the desire and opportunity for an actual human encounter," Sister Judith said.

The hope, she said, is to use the "virtual" community created through the Internet "to nourish the actual community" and a desire to participate in parish life.

Irish Archbishop Diarmuid Martin of Dublin said diocesan newspapers and contact with religion reporters from secular newspapers continue to be important ways for the church to get its message out and "on the public record."

But because newspaper readership is shrinking, he suggested the church invest in professionally organized focus groups to study how much of the church's message is being heard and by whom.

Archbishop George H. Niederauer of San Francisco told the council that “one size does not fit all” when communicating in the modern world; the church needs specific projects aimed at the young, the elderly, active Catholics, the alienated and those who are indifferent.

And, he said, the council should act as a clearinghouse for the best church communications practices.

Bishops from Africa, Asia and Latin America urged the council not to assume their people have the same kind of media access that people in Europe and North America have.

Radio is hugely important in Africa; the Internet is dominating the media scene in much of Asia; and Latin America still has a stable television audience.

Tony Spence, director and editor in chief of Catholic News Service, also encouraged the council to support research on what is being done and what is working.

He told the council that a recent survey demonstrated that adult Catholics in the United States have access to Catholic media and use it on a regular basis, although there is much room for improvement.

And while the Internet “gives new opportunities for a tried-and-true medium such as print to reach new audiences,” it is not without its problems, particularly because “good scholarship and good journalism can be eclipsed by punditry and misinformation disguised as an authentic voice in the church.”

Jesuit Father Federico Lombardi, director of the Vatican press office and Vatican television center, outlined several communications priorities, including efforts “to make the pope’s thoughts and the position of the church known in the Muslim and Arab-speaking world.”

He also suggested the Vatican form a small group of consultants to help it evaluate the mountain of requests it receives from media outlets wanting to interview Pope Benedict XVI.

“The interviews given so far by the Holy Father have been very effective,” he said,

and Vatican Radio, the television production center and the press office have ensured they were widely distributed in many languages.