

Vatican publishing house: New page, new director, new ideas

VATICAN CITY - With a new director at the helm, the Vatican publishing house is turning a new page.

Salesian Father Giuseppe Costa, the recently appointed head of the Libreria Editrice Vaticana, said he wants to beef up the availability of Vatican publications around the world and expand the Vatican's offerings on art and culture.

"This publishing house can put out - must put out (publications) in support of Catholic culture," he said. And the distribution of commercial sales of all its publications "clearly need to be boosted, yet also re-examined" in new ways, he told Catholic News Service July 27.

The 61-year-old Italian priest and professor of journalism was appointed after Salesian Father Claudio Rossini's five-year term ended July 1.

The Vatican publishing house also "is getting things ready for orders over the Internet," he said. Currently, international orders only can be made by fax, mail or through the private Web site www.paxbook.com.

Because the Vatican's publishing house owns the rights to all the pope's written works, part of Father Costa's job involves combing over contracts sitting on his desk waiting for a signature.

"There is quite a bit of flexibility" whether a fee or royalty on future sales is required with obtaining authorization from the Vatican for reprinting papal texts, he said. For example, there is one kind of contract "for someone who wants to do something big (like a book or anthology) and another for (someone) who wants to make a small poster for the parish," he said.

Father Costa's down-to-earth manner puts guests immediately at ease and his bursts of laughter and colorful colloquialisms keep the conversation lively. These qualities undoubtedly come in handy for developing and maintaining a good rapport with editors and publishers from around the world, which, he said, is key to the job.

"It's a great job, an exciting job," Father Costa said. "And its international aspect is fascinating," he added, pointing to letters he received from around the globe congratulating him on his appointment.

Currently, the Vatican's catalogue offers publications in nearly 20 languages,

including Chinese, Korean and Russian. However, the lone offering in Esperanto, a two-volume Roman Missal, is sold-out.

The Italian priest said he holds a special place in his heart for North America. He received a degree in journalism at Marquette University in Milwaukee in 1994. Getting ideas and working with publishers in the United States is helpful, he noted. The Vatican publishing house has started looking at individual bishops' conferences as a way to get the pope's encyclicals and apostolic exhortations to the most people possible.

Publishers who were pirating papal texts for profit often justified their pilfering by saying the pope's words belong to everyone.

But by putting the texts and rights of the pope's encyclicals and other official documents in the hands of the bishops' conferences, the Vatican's publishing house is assured that the reprinted texts are accurate and sold at the cheapest price possible. Because, as Father Costa said, "The pope does belong to everyone, so for that reason it needs to be regulated, otherwise people do whatever they want" with his words.

Father Costa said that, "unlike in the past, (the publishing house) will make room for publications that are not solely official" Vatican documents in an effort to offer readers a greater selection of Catholic culture.

His office, like the hallway and rooms in the publishing house, is lined floor to ceiling with shelves straining with books. He carefully pulled down a large and heavy art book on the Vatican Museums' ancient mosaics collection and points out that it was published by a private Italian company.

Institutions within the Vatican, like the museums and the observatory, are completely free to choose any publisher they want. For example, U.S. Jesuit Brother Guy Consolmagno, a Vatican astronomer and author, published his memoir, "Brother Astronomer: Adventures of a Vatican Scientist," with the publishing powerhouse McGraw-Hill.

But Father Costa said ideally Vatican entities would look to their own publishing house to handle peddling their wares.

Brother Consolmagno told CNS that the Vatican publishing house "is a wonderful resource to have" for less marketable works that are important to publish.

He said the in-house publishing and distribution come in handy for publications such as his "Catalogue of the Vatican Meteorite Collection" which might have a very

limited circulation “and probably not a big market.”

He said the Vatican astronomers turn to their in-house publishers “when we want to be sure an important book gets out” and does not sit around waiting for a private publisher to pick it up.