

Vaticanstate.va: Navigating the world's smallest country

VATICAN CITY – Seven weeks after Pope Benedict XVI praised Vatican civil servants for their work in “our little state, from the most visible to the most hidden,” the state unveiled its own Web site.

The site – www.vaticanstate.va – is linked to and works closely with the Vatican’s main Web site, www.vatican.va, but provides more information about the offices that help run the state, as opposed to the church.

Officially launched July 19 in Italian, English, French, German and Spanish, the site includes live pictures from five webcams.

With a click on their computer, Internet users can join pilgrims praying at Pope John Paul II’s tomb in the grotto of St. Peter’s Basilica. A camera high on the Vatican hill points toward the dome of St. Peter’s Basilica. And three webcams have been set up on the dome itself: one looking at St. Peter’s Square, another at the Vatican Gardens and the third at the home of the new Web site, the Vatican governor’s office.

The site is set up for e-commerce, but online shoppers will have to wait until sometime in 2008 to order their Vatican stamps and coins or books, posters and reproductions from the Vatican Museums.

In an e-mail message July 18, the new webmaster said, “An exact date for the shopping has not been set,” but the governor’s office is working with the Vatican bank, formally the Institute for the Works of Religion, to make sure the site is user friendly and secure for credit-card transactions from around the world.

Oddly enough, the highly efficient Vatican postal service, which presumably would ship the goods, does not have its own section on the site, but the Vatican Telephone Service and the Vatican Pharmacy do.

The site includes a brief introduction to the government of Vatican City State, explaining that it is “an absolute monarchy. The head of state is the pope, who holds full legislative, executive and judicial powers.”

Between the death of one pope and the election of another, the powers are assumed by the College of Cardinals, it says. And the cardinals who have not yet reached their 80th birthdays are responsible for electing the new pope.

The man chosen by the cardinals “becomes sovereign of Vatican City State the

moment he accepts his election as pope,” it says.

The site also explains how the pope generally delegates a portion of his powers to ensure the smooth governance of the state and the promulgation of laws regulating life for its 800 residents, its employees and visitors.

The state’s courts merit a very brief description, but the 130-member Vatican police force gets a good-sized page. Perhaps because the police uniforms are not as famous as those worn by the Swiss Guards, seven photographs are included.

The Vatican fire department also falls under the responsibility of the governor’s office, but it initially did not have its own section on the newly launched site.

With Pope Benedict XVI set to arrive July 27 in Castel Gandolfo, the home of his summer residence south of Rome, visitors to the new Web site could check out the villa’s supermanicured gardens.

The site even points out that at 136 acres – including 74 acres of gardens and 62 acres devoted to farming – the villa’s territory exceeds that of the 109-acre Vatican City State in the heart of Rome.

As the site launched, it had a detailed history of the villa, but almost nothing about the decorative plants in the gardens or the plants villa workers grow for sale. And it did not mention the milk-producing cows.

On the other hand, the section dealing with the Vatican Gardens names some of the species they host, like “the majestic camphor tree (*Cinnamomum glanduliferum*)” and two varieties rare in Italy: an Australian silk-oak (*Grevillea robusta*) and “two very tall examples of dawn redwood (*Metasequoia glyptostroboides*).”

Like most official government Web sites, the Vatican City State site also includes an explanation and history of the Vatican flag and Vatican national anthem. Of course, there are links to sound files, giving visitors the option of hearing the anthem in its standard marching-band version or the much slower, fancier orchestral track.