

Vatican invites bloggers to first-ever summit

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Brother Miguel de la Lastra Montalban uses his iPad to connect to the Internet during a meeting of Catholic bloggers at the Vatican, Monday, May 2, 2011. The Vatican has invited 150 Catholic bloggers to attend a first-ever blogging summit Monday, increasingly aware of the role that faith-based blogging is playing in spreading Catholicism. (AP Photo/Pier Paolo Cito)

(AP) -- Monks, priests, nuns and lay bloggers hunched over their iPads and tweeted updates to their followers as the Vatican told them of its desire to get to know them better and establish a genuine relationship.

The Vatican on Monday invited 150 bloggers from around the world to a first-ever blogging summit, increasingly aware of the important role faith-based blogging is playing in spreading Catholicism.

"We're here for a dialogue, a dialogue that from our side means the conviction of the concrete, important and unique role of your presence in the world of communication," Monsignor Claudio Maria Celli, head

of the Vatican's social communication's office, told the bloggers.

The Vatican has been seeking to engage more with the online world: For the beatification of Pope John Paul II, the Vatican created a special Facebook page, Twitter account, ran clips of his 27-year pontificate on its YouTube channel and let the faithful send electronic postcards to one another about what they were experiencing via its youth-based news portal.

The blogging summit was another step in that direction.

The Catholic blogging community is as diverse as Roman Catholicism, with a range of views and topics: Some people blog about spirituality, others take a more political tone about the direction of the church, others share information about liturgical questions.

Elizabeth Scalia, who writes a popular blog called The anchoress, said the diversity of Catholicism runs into challenges when exposed to the limitless boundaries of the blogosphere, a reference to the often mean-spirited jabs that can sometimes define online debates about faith. She called for greater sense of charity among bloggers to keep the debate civil.

"Let's face it, when the ego is ignited and the passions are galloping, we all too easily ignore our own better angels and sacrifice charity for the satisfaction of what we consider a good jab at someone who got it wrong," she said.

The Rev. Roderick Vonhogen, a Dutch blogger, said blogging for Catholic priests is a great way to spread the faith to people who aren't necessarily looking for it. He says it can be even more effective than sitting in his remote parish celebrating Mass for 200 because he can reach 40,000 people around the world.

"If we just do what we do in our churches, behind closed doors, we will have empty buildings by the end of the day," he said.

Monsignor Paul Tighe, the No. 2 in the Vatican's social communications office, said the idea of bringing together a cross-section of bloggers had been kicking around the Vatican for some time, but that the occasion of John Paul's beatification Sunday seemed like the logical time to do it since many bloggers were going to be in Rome anyway.

"It's very much a first step, to meet with, to hear their concerns, to try to talk about some of the things we're doing and see if people want to take it further, or how they think it might be helpful to take the discussion further," Tighe said in a recent interview.

He stressed that the Vatican wasn't interested in trying to organize or police the Catholic [blogosphere](#), which has its own fair share of extremist views.

"I think we recognize that even if it were our agenda, it would be a very futile exercise," Tighe said.

As befits the rapid-fire way news travels in the blogging community, the conference drew 750 requests from would-be participants from around the world. Tighe said only 150 were accepted because of space constraints, and that they were chosen by language groups and then by lottery.

Some of those who didn't get in - many of them conservative or who write tradition-minded blogs - planned to attend an alternative summit scheduled for a Rome pub Tuesday, where organizers promised pizza and beer, and that "all the cool kids will be there."

More information:

Vatican blogging conference: <http://www.pccs.va>

Vatican's youth-focused portal: <http://pope2you.net>

Vatican's John Paul II website: <http://www.karol-wojtyla.org>

Alternative blog summit: <http://www.anglocath.blogspot.com>

The anchoress: <http://www.patheos.com/community/theanchoress>

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