

## Pope joins tweeting masses with Pontifex handle (Update 2)

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In this June 28, 2011 file photo, Pope Benedict XVI touches a touchpad to send a tweet for the launch of the Vatican news information portal "www.news.va", at the Vatican. The Vatican said Monday, Dec. 3, 2012, that Pope Benedict XVI will start tweeting in six languages from his own personal handle (at)Pontifex, on Dec. 12. The pontiff will be using a question and answer format in his first Tweet, focusing on answering questions about faith—in 140 characters. (AP Photo/Osservatore Romano, File) EDITORIAL USE ONLY

(AP)—Benedict XVI, the pope known for his hefty volumes of theology,

is now trying brevity—spreading the faith through his own Twitter account.

The pontiff will tweet in eight languages starting Dec. 12 using his personal handle (at)Pontifex, responding live to questions about faith during his weekly general audience, the Vatican said Monday.

Within six hours of the Vatican's announcement, Benedict had already garnered nearly 150,000 followers on the English version of (at)Pontifex alone, with thousands more following him in the eight other language accounts.

All that, and he hadn't even sent a single tweet.

He may never hit 1 billion faithful that the Catholic Church counts around the globe, but he's odds-on to get 1 million followers by the end of the year, British bookmakers Ladbrokes said.

The pope sent his first tweet last year from a generic Vatican account to launch the Holy See's news information portal, part of efforts to increase the church presence in social media and spread the faith. A personal Twitter account for the 85-year-old Benedict has been the subject of intense speculation ever since; Monday's news conference was packed, a strong indication of the interest it has generated.

Greg Burke, the Vatican's communications adviser, said the handle (at)Pontifex was chosen because it not only means pope in Latin, but also bridge-builder, suggesting unity. How often will the pope tweet? "As often as he wants," Burke said, adding that he hoped the tweeting would be frequent.



Vatican spokesman Father Federico Lombardi, left, and Vatican communications adviser Greg Burke present Pope Benedict XVI's Twitter web page, top right, to journalists at the Vatican press hall, Monday, Dec. 3, 2012. Pope Benedict XVI will start tweeting in six languages from his own personal handle (@Pontifex) on Dec. 12. The Vatican said Monday the pope will be using a question and answer format in his first Tweet, focusing on answering questions about faith—in 140 characters. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

While the pope will push the button himself on Dec. 12, subsequent tweets will be sent by someone in the Vatican's secretariat of state. They will, however, all be approved by the pope, officials said.

"It's always going to have his engagement and his approval," said Monsignor Paul Tighe, the No. 2 in the Vatican's social communications office. "Not physically, but from his mind."

Questions for the inaugural papal tweet can be submitted to (hash)askpontifex, and the pope will likely respond to three to five of

those sent from around the world, Burke said. Subsequent tweets are expected to remain spiritual in nature, taken from his teachings or homilies.

By late Monday, many of the questions sent in were jokes and criticism, including of the church sex abuse scandal—Twitter spam that the pope will likely never see.

Currently a host of Twitter accounts use the pope's name, purporting to be his personal account. The (at)Pontifex account, however, is certified as the only official papal Twitter feed, Tighe said. No special security arrangements have been taken to prevent the account from being hacked.

Burke said Twitter has many celebrity clients. "They seem to be able to take care of them. We assume they'll be able to take care of us as well."

Twitter spokeswoman Rachael Horowitz declined to comment on whether the strong interest in the launch of the pope's handle would break any records, saying Twitter doesn't track such data of individual account followers.

But she noted in an email that religious content on Twitter "punches above its weight" in terms of interest and engagement. Religious leaders, for example, get one retweet for every 500 followers, whereas a musician gets one for every 30,000 followers.

Papal tweets will be sent simultaneously in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese, Italian, German, Polish and Arabic. Monsignor Claudio Maria Celli, the president of the Vatican's social communications office, said he hoped to add Chinese.

He stressed that the papal tweets aren't to be considered infallible teachings, merely "pearls of wisdom" in the pope's own words.

The Vatican has been increasing its presence in social media, using YouTube channels and Facebook pages for special events and Twitter to engage believers and nonbelievers alike, particularly the young.

The Vatican decided against using a personal Facebook page for the pope because they thought it was too personal an interaction and would require more manpower to keep updated.

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