

Pope 2.0: Vatican launches Facebook application

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Pope Benedict XVI greets the faithful wearing his Saturn Hat, named after the ringed planet Saturn, during the weekly general audience in St. Peter's Square at the Vatican, Wednesday May 20, 2009. (AP Photo/Gregorio Borgia)

(AP) -- Pope Benedict XVI has entered the world of social networking sites and smartphones with a Vatican portal that includes Facebook and iPhone applications.

The Pope2You Web site was launched Thursday and allows Facebook users to send virtual postcards with photos of Benedict and excerpts from his messages. An application for [iPhone](#) and iPod Touch gives surfers video and audio news on the pope's travels and speeches, as well as on Catholic events worldwide.

The new portal is the latest update in the Vatican's efforts to broaden the pope's audience and reach out to young people. Earlier this year, Benedict got his own YouTube channel, which is now also linked to the portal.

While wary of the potential pitfalls of new media, the 82-year-old Benedict has also encouraged young Catholics to use the Internet to spread the church's message.

On Wednesday he told pilgrims gathered for his weekly audience that young people should use the Internet to build a better world through bonds of friendship and solidarity, adding that the digital world can help make the Gospel known.

For the Rev. Paolo Padrini, a technologically savvy Italian priest who led the Pope2You project, giving Benedict a presence on the world's largest online social network was in keeping with the church's centuries-old communications strategy.

"The walls of our churches are painted by the greatest artists of all time," Padrini said. "This means that the church has always invested in the culture of each period, using the best instruments available to communicate with people."

Padrini, 36, works in the small village of Stazzano in northern Italy and routinely chats online with his 2,500 parishioners. He was also behind another Vatican foray on the Web: iBreviary, an application that brought the book of daily prayers used by priests onto iPhones.

Padrini said the new project aimed to put the focus on the church by creating a Facebook application rather than a personal profile for Benedict like those made for stars and world leaders, including U.S. President Barack Obama.

"The pope is not a Hollywood star who signs autographs," Padrini told The Associated Press in a telephone interview Friday. "We don't follow a concept of leadership, the pope has always made it clear that he is a servant of the church."

Some top clergymen do have profiles on [Facebook](#), including Cardinal Crescenzio Sepe, the archbishop of Naples.

The Pope2You portal is run by the Vatican's Pontifical Council for Social Communications and is available in English, French, German, Italian and

Spanish. It was launched ahead of the church's World Communications Day on Sunday.

Padrini didn't know if the pope had been informed of the Web site, but said the initiative was consistent with the message the pope had prepared for World Communications Day.

Addressing the "digital generation," Benedict praises new media for helping people keep in touch and creating new friendships and communities worldwide.

But he also warns that social networking can become "obsessive," isolating individuals from real-life interaction.

"It would be sad if our desire to sustain and develop online friendships were to be at the cost of our availability to engage with our families, our neighbors and those we meet in the daily reality of our places of work, education and recreation," Benedict says in the message.

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On the Net:

<http://pope2you.net>

<http://www.vatican.va>

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