Pope on social networking: the virtual is real

January 24 2013, by Nicole Winfield

(AP)—Pope Benedict XVI put church leaders on notice Thursday, saying social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter aren't a virtual world they can ignore, but rather a very real world they must engage if they want to spread the faith to the next generation.

The 85-year-old Benedict, who tweets in nine languages, used his annual message on social communications to stress the potential of social media for the church as it struggles to keep followers and attract new ones amid religious apathy, competition from other churches and scandals that have driven the faithful away.

Archbishop Claudio Maria Celli, head of the Vatican's communications office, cited a 2012 study commissioned by U.S. bishops that found that 53 percent of Americans were unaware of any significant presence of the Catholic Church online.

Other studies, Celli said, made clear that the "millennial generation" of people born after 1982 use Facebook, Twitter and YouTube far more than their parents as primary sources of information, entertainment and sharing political views and community issues.

"The digital environment is not a parallel or purely virtual world, but is part of the daily experience of many people, especially the young," Benedict said in his message. "Social networks are the result of human interaction, but for their part they also reshape the dynamics of communication which builds relationships: a considered understanding of this environment is therefore the prerequisite for a significant

presence there."

Benedict himself still writes longhand, but he is a superstar online, with 2.5 million Twitter followers, nearly 11,000 of them following his Latin tweets alone. And under his pontificate, the Holy See has greatly increased its presence online, with YouTube channels, papal apps and an online news portal www.news.va that gathers all Vatican information in one place.

But the digital exposure hasn't come without risk or criticism: In the days after the Vatican announced that Benedict would respond to questions about faith on his first tweets from his (at)Pontifex handle last month, the Vatican was bombarded with threats of "Twitter bombs" from critics trying to scare the pope away from the online social forum.

"Leaving would've been a mistake," said Monsignor Paul Tighe, the No. 2 in the Vatican's social communications office. "It wouldn't have been fair to abandon all the people who joyfully welcomed the pope's message."

Celli acknowledged that much of the pope's message this year repeated exhortations from previous years about the need for respectful dialogue online, for users to present themselves authentically and to listen, not just preach.

"At first look it could look like reheated soup," Celli conceded. But he said that sometimes messages need repeating, particularly in the 2,000-year-old Catholic Church. "I don't want to make any particular revelations here, but don't believe that everything that is said is absorbed at the ecclesial level."

Celli noted, for example, that at a recent Vatican meeting of the world's bishops on spreading the faith, the recommendations for the church's

social communications strategy "could have been written 30 years ago."

"That means that he who is intervening doesn't have the perception of what is happening today, in the sphere of social networking," Celli said. "That's a problem for us."

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Citation: Pope on social networking: the virtual is real (2013, January 24) retrieved 17 April 2024 from https://phys.org/news/2013-01-pope-social-networking-virtual-real.html

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